PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1997–98

COMPRISING PERIOD
16 June—27 June 1997

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16 June 1997

THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES VOLUME 296

THIRD VOLUME OF SESSION 1997-98

House of Commons

Monday 16 June 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

Staffordshire Regiment

1. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the future role of the Staffordshire regiment; and if he will make a statement. [2040]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Dr. John Reid): The Staffordshire regiment is currently a light infantry battalion employed in the national defence role. The strategic defence review, launched on 28 May, will decide how our armed forces should be structured, equipped and deployed to meet our nation's interests and commitments. It would be premature to assess the likely outcome of the review before the process is complete.

Mr. Fabricant: I welcome the Minister and, indeed, the Secretary of State to their posts.

The Minister will recall that in 1991 there were contingency plans to merge the Staffordshire regiment with the Cheshires. As the Staffordshire regiment is one of only two county regiments in the British Army, and the morale of soldiers in the Staffordshire regiment will not be helped by the strategic defence review, will the Minister give some added assurance that the regiment, which was founded in Lichfield in 1705 and has an illustrious 300-year history, will have some future under a Labour Government?

Dr. Reid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm words. I recall the proposals that the Conservative Government made regarding the Staffordshire regiment, which were then reversed after a campaign by hon. Members on both sides of the House. I am happy to acknowledge the regiment's long and proud history of service to the Crown which, as the hon. Gentleman said, dates back to 1705. I fully appreciate the sense of regimental identity and the close links that regiments may enjoy with the local community, but the hon. Gentleman—and hon. Members who may ask similar questions in respect of other regiments—will appreciate, as the regiment does, that it would be quite wrong to announce decisions about the outcome of the wide-ranging review before it has even started.

Mr. Maginnis: In support of what the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) suggested, I pay tribute to the Staffordshire regiment, which has served for five of the last 20 years in Northern Ireland with considerable distinction. It lost a man in south Armagh in 1984, and it served again in my constituency more recently. May I suggest to the Minister that it is wrong to keep our security services generally in a state of limbo and that six years after "Options for Change" it is time for consolidation? I implore him to move towards reassuring the men and women who serve in the armed forces.

Dr. Reid: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and to his backing for the Staffordshire regiment, which has served not only in Northern Ireland but in the Gulf war.

The ultimate purpose of the strategic defence review is to give the clarity of direction and the coherence to our strategy in foreign affairs and defence matters that have

been singularly lacking throughout the past six or seven years, during which we have had one mini-review after another, regiments have been merged and chopped only to be reinstated and millions have been paid out in redundancy payments only to find that we are now short of soldiers. After a period of chaos and instability, the armed forces are entitled to ask that a new Government give some coherence and clarity, as we shall do with the strategic defence review.

Trident Missile System

2. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the total cost of the Trident missile system over its remaining operational life. [2041]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): Remaining acquisition costs for the Trident system, as at September 1996, stood at just under £1.5 billion. Operating costs will average £200 million per annum over a 30-year in-service life.

Mr. Corbyn: Will the Minister confirm that that cost is astronomical and that the money could be much better used on the much needed social infrastructure of this country—health, education and housing—and that nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons capability will be included in the defence review? Will the Department give a serious answer to the International Court of Justice decision regarding the legality and morality of any state in the world holding nuclear weapons?

Mr. Spellar: I confirm that the figures that I have given constitute 1 per cent. of the defence budget over the next 30 years. I should also point out that both my hon. Friend and I stood at the last election on a manifesto in which we said very firmly that we would retain Trident.

Mr. Wilkinson: Will the Minister clarify his answer? Does it mean that the Labour Government will keep four boats in service throughout the period in question—throughout the operational life of the Trident missile system—and that one boat will be kept permanently on station, so that the full deterrent effectiveness can be maintained?

Mr. Spellar: The answer is quite straightforward. The fourth boat has already been ordered, and will be delivered. We shall be looking at retaining the minimal deterrent that is necessary to fulfil our obligations.

Former Yugoslavia

3. **Mr. Crausby:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he last visited the former Yugoslavia to discuss the British contribution to IFOR. [2042]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): I visited the former Yugoslavia from 19 to 20 May and had very useful discussions with the multinational stabilisation force and with United Kingdom commanders and troops. I also had meetings with members of the Bosnian presidency and the entity Defence Ministers.

Mr. Crausby: When my right hon. Friend next meets his American counterpart, will he stress the importance of United States participation in European security, and also stress that our common policy on Bosnia should be "in together, out together"?

Mr. Robertson: When I met the American Secretary of Defence last week, I made it clear that the success of SFOR—the stabilisation force—is down not just to NATO and the NATO countries whose forces are serving in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but to the other nations involved there, and to Ukraine and Russia, which are partners in this regard. That is part of the considerable success that we have achieved in the area, providing a unique opportunity for previously warring factions to rebuild civic institutions there.

I have reminded the Americans, and will continue to remind them, that the Dayton peace accords were a substantial triumph for western and, perhaps especially, American diplomacy. We should not rashly throw away the rewards that have been achieved. The main point at present, however, is that the burden of responsibility lies with the Bosnian leadership, which has not done enough. The international community will not be taken for granted. We went in together, we stay in together, we have succeeded together, and if nothing happens on the ground we shall clearly have to leave together as well.

Mr. Brazier: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends to their posts, to which I am sure that they will bring considerable energy and imagination. May I none the less urge the right hon. Gentleman, in the light of the answer that he has just given and the answer given earlier by his hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces about the defence review, to remember that the primary purpose of Britain's armed forces is the defence of this country and its vital interests in a very dangerous world? Peacekeeping is an activity, not the principal purpose.

Mr. Robertson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the warm and appropriate welcome that he gave the new Ministers. I know that the point has been well taken on the Opposition Front Bench, however temporary that may be.

The hon. Gentleman is right: the primary role of our armed forces is the defence of Britain and Britain's interests. However, we also have a wider international responsibility. When I met our troops serving in Bosnia-Herzegovina a few weeks ago, I was proud of them and I was impressed by the job that they are doing on behalf of the international community, along with representatives of that community, in maintaining peace in a part of the world that has scarred Europe for many generations. Together, as an international community, we have provided a rare moment of opportunity for people to dig themselves out of the situation and build a permanent peace.

Mr. Dalyell: Could the difficult old question of local allowances for our service men in the British Army of the Rhine, who have had to leave their families behind in Fallingbostel or elsewhere, be reconsidered? When they go to Bosnia, they lose the allowances that they had in Germany. Can my right hon. Friend imagine the wry smiles of the men of B squadron of the Scots Dragoon Guards when they learn that the Canadians, with whom

they are doing manoeuvres, get free telephone calls for as long as they like to Canada, whereas the Scots' telephone calls are financially restricted?

Mr. Robertson: I know of my hon. Friend's distinguished record of service with that regiment and I was extremely pleased to meet it in Baraci just before he arrived on the scene. His point was made to me there, too. However, the matter is not as uncomplicated as he suggests. Some of the troops from the 34 nations serving in Bosnia-Herzegovina have different allowances and benefit from different regimes, but the allowances paid in Germany are for specific circumstances which are not deemed to relate to service in Bosnia. I listened with great care to the points that were made politely and sensibly by our forces in that part of the world. We shall keep these issues under permanent review.

Mr. Martin Bell: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that as a result of necessary and valuable service in Bosnia, men in some units, such as the Queen's Royal Hussars, have spent two and a half of the past five years away from their families? How does he intend to address the problem of overstretch?

Mr. Robertson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I am aware of the stresses and strains which face those who serve in Bosnia, Northern Ireland and other parts of the world where British forces are committed, never mind those who serve in the homeland. The problem of overstretch will be seriously addressed in our strategic defence review because it is fundamental to how well and how professionally our forces discharge the roles that we ask them to perform in the world today.

The strategic defence review is not some ploy by an incoming Government: it is a determined attempt to provide clarity and vision for the future of this country and to ensure that when our troops discharge the obligations that the people want us to place on them they are not hindered by the problems of overstretch that many of them face today.

Land Mines

4. **Ms Dari Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action his Department is taking in relation to anti–personnel land mines. [2043]

Mr. George Robertson: On 21 May we announced that we would ban all trade in anti-personnel land mines involving the United Kingdom—that is, their import, export, transfer and manufacture. We also introduced a complete moratorium on their operational use. We will phase out our stocks of such land mines by 2005 at the latest.

Ms Taylor: I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to his post, and I am delighted with his answer. The moratorium on land mines is long overdue. Will the moratorium extend to the JP-233 airfield denial weapon?

Mr. Robertson: I thank my hon. Friend for her welcome, and I welcome her to the House. I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I were able to discharge our clear manifesto commitment so quickly after coming to power. Few people in this country could tolerate any longer the continued use in the world of these disgraceful and almost immoral weapons. Our move is designed as a signal and as part of a momentum that we hope will encompass all those involved with such weaponry.

When I visited Bosnia-Herzegovina, I flew over some of the most stunningly beautiful land in the world. It was impossible to believe that we could not land on it or walk on it. Future generations may not be able to do so either, because of the estimated 3 million land mines that have been spread throughout that country.

The JP-233 falls within the definition of an anti-personnel land mine under the terms of revised protocol 2 to the United Nations weaponry convention and so is covered by the moratorium that we have announced.

Mr. Robathan: In a spirit of friendly co-operation I, too, welcome the right hon. Gentleman and his team for the entertainment value that they will bring to the Government Front Bench. I certainly agree that we all deplore land mines and I also agree with the moratorium. Does the Secretary of State agree that none of the 3 million anti-personnel mines laid in Bosnia was British? Can he say specifically when an anti-personnel mine was last manufactured in the United Kingdom and when an anti-personnel mine was last exported?

Mr. Robertson: Anti-personnel mines were used by this country in the Gulf war and in the Falklands conflict. This country adopted a responsible way of doing that with marked minefields, and all the mines were subsequently taken up. The point is not whether we have exported or manufactured anti-personnel land mines in the past, but the fact that there is currently no legal regime to prevent their being manufactured or exported. We shall introduce legislation to achieve that and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome.

The subject of anti-personnel land mines holds no entertainment value at all: it is a deeply serious subject which has galvanised the United State Congress and many people throughout the world. What we are doing is not a gesture, but part of a worldwide movement to outlaw a particular type of weapon which should have been outlawed a long time ago.

Merchant Ships

5. **Mr. William O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the availability of British merchant ships for defence purposes. [2044]

Dr. John Reid: The availability of militarily useful British merchant ships which might be used for defence purposes is kept under regular review as part of our normal planning.

Mr. O'Brien: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply. Is he aware that the former Conservative Government's policy meant that in the massive sea operation, Purple Heart, between the United Kingdom Government and the United States Government, not one British merchant vessel was engaged or chartered? Likewise, when we shipped troops and machines to Bosnia, not one British

merchant ship was engaged. The American navy moved the troops and equipment. As a result of the Conservative Government's lack of confidence, our merchant fleet is run down; manpower is reducing, training has almost stopped, and if action is not taken to improve the merchant fleet's facilities and equipment, our future could be in jeopardy. Will the Minister take note of my concerns, which have also been expressed by many others, with a view to strengthening the British merchant fleet?

Dr. Reid: I will certainly take note of my hon. Friend's concerns. I fully understand and share his profound regret at the decline of the British flagged fleet under the last Tory Government. He may be reassured that the Government are committed to working with all concerned to help to develop the industry's economic potential to the full. We are supremely conscious of the value of merchant ships and of seafarers to man them in times of crisis, and I will ensure that my officials enjoy a close and productive relationship with the Chamber of Shipping.

Mr. Soames: I, too, welcome the Secretary of State and his hon. Friends to their important jobs and I wish them every success in what I am sure will be an interesting time for them. Does the Minister agree about the extreme importance to the joint rapid deployment force of securing the second lease on a roll-on roll-off ferry? Will he confirm that, despite the defence review, and bearing in mind the importance of the joint rapid deployment force, the Government intend to go ahead with that second lease?

Dr. Reid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome and may I be the first to welcome him to his new role as a shadow? *[Interruption.]* I have looked forward for some time to saying that. I completely accept the important role of the ro-ro ferry that he mentions in the joint rapid deployment force and in other possible expeditionary ventures of that nature. He will appreciate, however, that it would not be wise—before we have even started a review—to start ring-fencing every issue that is raised by every hon. Member, every regiment and every other item. Nevertheless, I appreciate the important role that the item that he has mentioned plays in our future rapid deployment force.

Mrs. Dunwoody: As a result of the cynical rundown of the British fleet by the Conservative Government, fewer and fewer people go into any kind of merchant fleet training and we cannot operate any fleet, either safely or unsafely, unless we have the personnel. Will my hon. Friend therefore examine the training programmes closely and do his best to expand the number of British youngsters being trained to go to sea?

Dr. Reid: As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien), who asked the main question on this, I share the regret at the dramatic decline in both shipping and training during the period of the last Conservative Government. We shall obviously have to consider that and the sectors on which we might militarily depend. I mention merely that we should not forget that the Ministry of Defence maintains one of the largest civilian fleets in Europe in the form of 17 ships of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to its important work around the globe and I know that its excellent training and cadetship are highly regarded throughout the shipping industry, but it is small compensation in the face of the decline in other sectors over the past 20 years.

Defence Review

6. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what priority is being given to defence procurement in the strategic defence review. [2045]

Mr. George Robertson: The strategic defence review will ensure that the armed forces are properly equipped to undertake the tasks that we ask of them. The Government are also committed to a strong British defence industry, as a strategic part of our industrial base as well as of our defence effort.

Mr. Evans: I congratulate the Secretary of State and his team on their appointment. What progress has either he or the Prime Minister made in talks with their German opposite numbers on the European fighter aircraft? The Secretary of State will know that it is important to my constituency not just because of British Aerospace, but because of the number of smaller defence contractors who are dependent on the aircraft going into full production. Does he agree that the aircraft is important for this country's future defence capability and that we want to ensure that the Royal Air Force gets the best equipment possible?

Mr. Robertson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. I agree with the points that he has made. We made it clear before the election that we supported the Eurofighter programme and we shall order it according to the conditions and numbers previously announced. As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, the Eurofighter is not simply about jobs because it will form the primary component of the RAF's fighting capability. Two weeks ago in Bonn, I met the German Defence Minister, Herr Rühe, whom I have known for many years. He confirmed that the German Government wanted the Eurofighter and intended, if they could, to go ahead with it. He aimed to get agreement from the German Cabinet's budget meeting on 11 July.

When my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister met Chancellor Kohl on 6 June, the Chancellor made clear his personal commitment to the Eurofighter programme and his aim to secure the German Government's commitment to the production phase in July within the framework of the draft 1998 federal budget. Those were extremely good signs for the future of the Eurofighter programme and we await with great interest the outcome of the German Government's review.

Mr. Barry Jones: In welcoming my right hon. Friend, may I persuade him of the great importance to Britain of the future large aircraft project? In my constituency, 2,500 Airbus workers manufactured the wings of the Airbus airliners and would like to manufacture the wings of the future large aircraft. Will he receive a small deputation on the matter, particularly bearing it in mind that the late delivery of the Lockheed C130J has let down his Department so far?

Mr. Robertson: Over the 18 years that I occupied the Opposition Front Bench, I never realised how popular one

could become if one became Secretary of State for Defence: the offers to keep me company in my office every hour of the day or night, to discuss every procurement contract, warm me enormously.

We do not intend to impose a moratorium on existing contracts as part of our strategic defence review. Business will proceed as normally as possible and projects already under contract will continue. For future contracts, we shall consider major equipment projects according to their individual circumstances and in relation to progress on the review. I shall certainly consider meeting my hon. Friend, but he may find that his best first step in putting his case would be to request a meeting with my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Gilbert, the Minister for Defence Procurement.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: I add my congratulations to the right hon. Gentleman and his ministerial colleagues. Does he accept that the Eurofighter project enjoys all-party support—despite the fact that his predecessor, Mr. Michael Portillo, entertained the notion of leasing second-hand F16 aircraft for the Royal Air Force, which would undoubtedly have undermined the whole Eurofighter project?

Will the right hon. Gentleman give the House an undertaking that the defence review will not be a smokescreen behind which the Chancellor of the Exchequer can mount a dawn raid on the defence budget?

Mr. Robertson: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for his warm welcome. I look forward to working with him and the official Opposition spokesmen in building what will be a genuine consensus on defence. For too long, defence has been a political football. I hope that our strategic defence review will, at long last, bring about the consensus on defence that I believe is wanted by the vast majority of people.

I am grateful for the hon. and learned Gentleman's support for the Eurofighter project. It should be understood that it is important both for its European symbolism and as a major multinational contract to build a European aircraft to meet European needs.

I assure the hon. and learned Gentleman that the strategic defence review will be foreign policy led, based on the priorities that we believe are important for this country in the world as a whole. It will not be predicated on savings in any other budget. We shall look for value for money in everything on which the defence budget is spent—the people expect no less than that—but I repeat that the review will be foreign policy led and not Treasury led.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: When the defence review is finally under way, how independent will it be of service pressures?

Mr. Robertson: We shall listen to the views of the services, just as we shall listen to the views of the public. We also intend to take into account the views of the Opposition parties and the views of experts. Through the two seminars that will be organised in July, and through our invitation to the public, we intend to bear in mind as many different views as possible before reaching a considered conclusion. Obviously, the services will contribute their views—as they rightly should.

I have made it clear to the troops, at every level, that I expect to hear their views as to what they want the outcome to be. I visited the Royal Naval college at Greenwich last week, where the joint senior command course is being held. The services represented there include the civil service as well as the police force. They are carrying out their own strategic defence review, and I have asked for a copy of that to be submitted to me so that I can build it into our considerations.

Mr. Arbuthnot: I, too, welcome the right hon. Gentleman and his team to their important positions. Is it true that there are papers circulating within the Ministry of Defence envisaging spending cuts of £3 billion or more?

Mr. Robertson: If there are, they are probably left over from the last Administration. On a more conciliatory note, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. After 18 years in opposition, I know how he feels. After 18 years, he might have half a chance of getting it right.

I know of no papers suggesting budget cuts. We shall put the foreign policy priorities of this country first and then give a sense of clarity and direction to our forces as to how their roles can be properly and economically carried out for the future of our country.

Mr. Radice: I welcome my right hon. Friend and his colleagues to their new positions.

May I say that, as a former officer in Her Majesty's Coldstream Guards, I am absolutely confident that the defence strategic review is a good idea? I am also confident that Her Majesty's defence is in good hands.

Mr. Robertson: I thank my hon. Friend—who is one of my oldest friends in politics—for his kind and generous remarks. On Saturday, the Guards regiments performed Trooping the Colour with their customary skill and professionalism, as I am sure that the public noticed.

I also thank my hon. Friend for his welcome for the strategic defence review. Despite a few grudging remarks from one or two small quarters, the idea for such a review was welcomed by people from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament right across to the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark), Mr. David Hart and Mr. Douglas Hurd. They all support the idea that the United Kingdom should examine both our defence needs in an international context and how to marry our military resources to those needs. I hope that we can maintain that broad consensus of welcome until the exercise is completed.

7. **Mr. Spring:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence the continuation of which procurement programmes will be under consideration in the strategic defence review. [2046]

Mr. George Robertson: There will be no moratorium, and business will proceed as normally as possible. Decisions on major equipment programmes not yet under contract will be considered on their individual circumstances and in relation to progress with the review. Projects already under contract will continue.

Mr. Spring: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware of the crucial importance of advanced and effective

anti-armour weaponry in modern warfare. Therefore, will he assure the House that, in any strategic review, the Brimstone programme will not be put in jeopardy?

Mr. Robertson: We shall examine all procurement proposals in the light of the strategic defence review proposals. We shall not have a moratorium and do not believe that there should be a further long period of uncertainty for our armed forces. Avoiding such uncertainty is why we are proceeding quickly with the review, which will report by the end of the year. The time period is sufficiently brief to ensure that there is no further uncertainty for those who, in the past five years, have experienced maximum uncertainty, but is also sufficiently ambitious to ensure that the right decisions are made.

Mr. Cohen: In the procurement programme, will my right hon. Friend ensure that we do not purchase any more "use it or lose it" weaponry—which is weaponry that has to be used in an early strike?

Mr. Robertson: We shall look at all the procurement projects proposed by the military that are considered to be in the interests of the country's defence. The strategic defence review will examine some future proposals, but it will not affect current procurement decisions.

Sir Patrick Cormack: In warmly welcoming the right hon. Gentleman and the tone of his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring), may I ask him to agree that nothing is more corrosive of morale than uncertainty? Will he give a firm undertaking that, when the review is complete, there will be no further attempt to examine or cut down the armed forces during the lifetime of this Parliament?

Mr. Robertson: It would be foolish and rash for any Government to say that, irrespective of circumstances, nothing will be re-examined. We are conducting a major strategic review, and, as the hon. Gentleman will have registered, it has been welcomed by a wide cross-section of opinion, including senior members of the Conservative party. The review offers an opportunity for everyone to become involved in the process of reaching a considered decision. Clearly, however, we shall have to bear in mind any changed external circumstances and ensure that our armed forces are ready for any future threats that might develop.

Defence Diversification Agency

8. **Mrs. Mahon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Government's plans to establish a defence diversification agency. [2047]

Mr. Spellar: The Government will be making proposals in the autumn on how best to give effect to the objectives for defence diversification as outlined in our manifesto. They will include how best to harness the contribution of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency to those objectives.

Mrs. Mahon: Does the Minister agree that the success of any defence diversification agency would depend on the defence industry extending its expertise to civilian industry? Would that not help British industry to take advantage of commercial opportunities in future?

Mr. Spellar: Very much so. The objective of defence diversification is to widen the contribution made by the UK defence industrial base to Britain's economic performance by diversifying some of its technological processes and manufacturing skills into new markets and to ensure better co-ordination between Government Departments on issues such as regional policy, training and business planning in order to develop a positive strategy for industrial regeneration. However, we also have to stress that it is not a one-way street: the Ministry of Defence and the forces would also benefit from having a broader, more resilient supplier base for the future.

Mr. Burns: Is the Minister aware that my constituency has paid a very high price for the peace dividend because of our reliance on defence-related industries and that, only last week, there were 535 redundancies at GEC Marconi Communications? Given that such companies have, over the past eight years or so, actively and positively sought to broaden their manufacturing base by diversifying, what practical help can be given in advance of any review because, sadly, redundancies cannot wait until the result of that review?

Mr. Spellar: I very much take the hon. Gentleman's point and fully understand the difficulties that his constituency has faced, especially in recent weeks as a result of the closures. That is why we would very much welcome approaches from companies and from the hon. Gentleman himself as to means by which we can take the process forward and examine defence diversification. The fact that we are looking at a mechanism being announced in the autumn does not mean that we have to stand still at the moment and ignore sensible proposals made to us. I would greatly welcome such proposals from the hon. Gentleman.

Service Pensions

9. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the defence review will include a comprehensive review of service pensions. [2048]

Dr. John Reid: The strategic defence review will deal with many aspects of defence policy, but it is not expected to cover service pensions. The Government will, however, keep personnel issues relating to the armed forces, including pensions, under full consideration.

Mr. Gray: In that case, will the Minister take urgent steps to examine the case of British prisoners of war from the second world war whose pay, as he will know, was cut by a half from the day they were captured until the day they were released? Will he take that fact into account when he considers their pensions and their widows' pensions?

Dr. Reid: Although it is not related to service pensions, I understand the problem to which the hon. Gentleman refers. It is being considered at present, and I thank him for

the representations that he has made. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will be bringing news of any decision to the House in due course, and in the not too distant future.

Mr. MacShane: The Minister will be aware of the deplorable indifference of the Conservative party when in government to the problem of war veterans, their pensions and so on. He will also know of the calls from the Labour party when in opposition for a Minister to be responsible for veterans' issues. Can the Minister say which of his distinguished colleagues is the point of contact when we want to take up matters concerning veterans who served, in one way or another, in the armed forces?

Dr. Reid: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He will be aware that many of the issues, including some of those relating to pensions, are under the control and administration of the Department of Social Security. However, he is right to refer to the deplorable record of the last Government and their treatment of personnel issues and of service men and women before, during and after their service to this country. We shall be considering how best to meet the requirement for a veterans' unit in the Ministry of Defence, and I can tell him that the distinguished member of the defence team to whom he referred will be me.

Nuclear Test Veterans

11. **Mr. Rowlands:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the claims of the British nuclear test veterans. [2051]

Mr. Spellar: Under the provisions of the war pensions scheme administered by the Department of Social Security, a war pension may be awarded in respect of any death or disablement which is due to service in the armed forces. Claims for war pensions have been received from ex-service personnel who participated in the nuclear tests and awards have been made where there is reliable evidence to raise a reasonable doubt that the death or disablement is due to service.

Mr. Rowlands: Are there not many outstanding claims? Is it not true that the United States Government have settled all the claims of men affected by nuclear tests? Could we not follow their example and be rather more generous in responding to the many veterans who have suffered illness consequent on their service?

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend is right in that the United States has made a decision to pay compensation to the Marshall islanders who were near the tests. It will, no doubt, have taken account of the facts of the specific case, as we are doing in the case of British nuclear test veterans. We are having to work on the basis of scientific evidence and the facts made available to us by the National Radiological Protection Board. We shall continue to work on that. As my hon. Friend will know, in the related issue of workers in Chatham dockyard who were exposed to radiation, we are making major efforts to improve access to records to enable them best to pursue their case and interests.

Mrs. Ewing: I welcome the Front-Bench Members to their duties in the Ministry of Defence.

Will serious consideration be given to the ruling on the breach of articles 6 and 8 of the convention? Will it therefore be possible for the Government to ensure that more veterans who were subjected to nuclear testing have access to their own war records, which always seems to be a problem for those individuals? As it was ruled that there appeared to be a lack of candour from the last Government, can we have candour from this Government and, I hope, action for those people?

Mr. Spellar: Many of the records on the atmospheric nuclear tests have already been released to the public and, as the hon. Lady knows, veterans have drawn on those records in making their case to the European Court of Human Rights. Other records are currently being reviewed for release. However, some will need to remain classified if they contain details of weapons design, as the release of such information would breach the Government's obligations under the non-proliferation treaty. The Government do not accept the conclusion of the European Court of Human Rights that lack of access to unspecified contemporary yield and radiation records prevented the veterans from getting a fair hearing before the pensions appeal tribunal.

Mr. McWilliam: Does my hon. Friend understand that the records that have been released and some that have not were looked at by the Select Committee on Defence in the previous Parliament? Does he realise how conflicting some of the evidence is and will he undertake to revisit that evidence in detail, particularly in respect of the Bikini atoll tests?

Mr. Spellar: The study that was undertaken by Sir Richard Doll and the National Radiological Protection Board has been widely publicised and subjected to scientific review. We are not aware of any substantial scientific criticisms of that study, but if such criticisms exist, we are prepared to examine them.

Defence Review

12. **Mr. Keith Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will issue a mission statement for his Department before the defence review. [2052]

Dr. John Reid: Yes.

Mr. Simpson: Like my colleagues, I welcome the right hon. and hon. Gentlemen to their new positions—Scotland's loss is defence's gain.

In an earlier answer, the Secretary of State said that the strategic defence review was going to be Foreign Office led; but in the Foreign Office mission statement, which was released after 10 days by the Foreign Secretary, there is barely any mention of security or defence matters. Will the hon. Gentleman tell us the exact benchmarks that will be established in the defence mission statement, especially those relating to the size of the defence budget?

Dr. Reid: I thank the hon. Gentleman, but have to tell him that my right hon. Friend did not say that the review would be Foreign Office led—he said that it would be foreign policy led. The aim of the Ministry of Defence is to provide the defence capabilities needed to ensure the security and defence of the United Kingdom and

our dependent territories and to help discharge our international responsibilities by supporting the Government's foreign policy objectives and contributing to wider international peace and security. We intend to issue shortly revised aims and objectives for my Department in the form of a mission statement.

Mr. Miller: In such a mission statement, will my hon. Friend consider including some of the activities of Her Majesty's forces that are less understood by the public? I am thinking particularly of the Royal Navy, where our forces are engaged in anti-drugs activities and support Customs and Excise and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Dr. Reid: I very much take the point made by my hon. Friend, who I know has been a great supporter of the forces. Indeed, my hon. Friend is a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, which I recommend to all hon. Members who have not yet completed it, including, I understand, the Opposition Front-Bench team. As for the mission statement, we shall certainly look not only at our basic aims—defending our country, and its dependent territories' freedoms and interests, and discharging our international responsibilities—but at the wider themes outlined by my right hon. Friend. the Secretary of State for Defence. Those themes involve caring for our people, contributing to our community, and establishing good communications in order to ensure the widest participation in, and support for, our defence policies and priorities.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

Private Contractors

34. **Mr. Bayley:** To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission what assessment the commission has made of the adequacy of the resources available to the Comptroller and Auditor General to evaluate whether private suppliers of services purchased by public authorities are meeting the terms of their contracts and providing value for money. [2030]

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission): The commission regularly meets to assess the adequacy of the resources available to the Comptroller and Auditor General. Resources required to examine the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of services purchased by public authorities and provided by private suppliers are included in the estimates, but are not assessed separately. The Comptroller and Auditor General does not, however, have a guaranteed right of access to the records of contractors where the activities of Government Departments are contracted out. The then Chairman of the commission and I recommended to the previous Administration that the Comptroller and Auditor General should have such access and I hope that we can achieve that aim under the present Administration.

Mr. Bayley: I am grateful to the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission for his useful response. Will he consider the position of passenger rail services which, as a result of privatisation, now attract a much larger public subsidy than when they were run by British Rail? Does the Chairman agree that the audit trail is inevitably much more complicated when one has to follow it through to contractors? Does he also agree that access to private rail operators' records is necessary if the Government are to ensure that value for money is achieved as a result of that increased public subsidy?

Mr. Sheldon: There is unquestionably a need for greater access. The Comptroller and Auditor General does not have access to contracted-out functions. In addition, he does not have the same rights of access to final recipients of European Union funds in the United Kingdom, although the European Court of Auditors does. That is a gap, and I shall continue to press for Government action to fill it.

Mr. Rowe: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman, whose chairmanship of the Public Accounts Committee has been long and distinguished.

I also welcome this opportunity to place on record for the first time in this Parliament that, as a Conservative Member, I share the right hon. Gentleman's view that there is a big gap in the Comptroller and Auditor General's powers. The capacity to follow public money and its effectiveness further than is currently the case is an indispensable part of an effective Public Accounts Committee and of the Comptroller and Auditor General's function. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will make every effort to urge the new Administration to take that on board.

Mr. Sheldon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those remarks.

There was unanimity in the Public Accounts Committee on the need to follow public money into some areas where private contractors are involved. As the hon. Gentleman said, we shall have to make progress on that issue.

Role of the Commission

35. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission what discussions he has had with the Comptroller and Auditor General on the role of the Public Accounts Commission. [2031]

Mr. Sheldon: Since becoming Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, I have not yet had discussions with the Comptroller and Auditor General. The role of the Commission is set out in legislation, as my hon. Friend knows.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: My right hon. Friend has been a Treasury Minister. He has been Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee for 14 years, and he has worked closely with the National Audit Office throughout that time. Does he agree that there is no better organisation—no more independent organisation—capable of carrying out a review of the nation's finances, especially with a view to establishing what the nation's liabilities are?

Mr. Sheldon: I fully endorse what my hon. Friend said about the National Audit Office. Its standing has

undoubtedly grown during the past several years, and the people and accountants involved in it have the highest reputation in the country. However, in preparing their forecasts of the public finances, they will review the assumptions adopted for economic growth, unemployment and interest rates and the conventions used for projecting proceeds from privatisation and from those measures that are called spend to save. I believe that the reputation of the National Audit Office will be fully vindicated by the report that we shall shortly receive.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Accounts (Surplus)

36. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what factors underlie the surplus of £1.9 million in the accounts published in the Church Commission Report 1996. [2032]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Bell: May I assure the House that the thunder that is outside at the moment, rattling around the precincts of the House, is nothing to do with my appointment as Second Church Estates Commissioner?

In answer to my hon. Friend, the £1.9 million figure represents the unconsolidated surplus in the commissioners' own books. The actual consolidated surplus is £9 million.

Mr. Flynn: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment as our official conduit to the Almighty, but may I address my remarks to the rather more worldly financial turmoil of the Church of England? Will he meet those organisations that are campaigning for recovery of Church funds through the parishes protection group, who were asking why we have not had the independent investigation that the Social Security Select Committee has asked for into the £1 billion lost fund of the Church of England and the £2.5 billion shortfall in the funds for clergy pensions?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I have spent a weekend on the Queen Anne's Bounty and the First Fruits and Tenths, so I am edging my way into the high finance of the Church. Evidence was given to the Social Security Select Committee; the Committee has not raised further issues with the commissioners at this time. Clearly, any further submissions will be looked at and will be taken into account by the Church Commissioners.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I also extend my welcome to the hon. Gentleman on his appointment to his important post.

When the hon. Gentleman considers that surplus in the recent accounts, will he look at the Pensions Measure 1997, which was passed in the previous Parliament? It will require all dioceses and parishes to pay all future pensions—a move that will place a severe strain on some parishes and dioceses and may make some unviable. If that is the case, will the hon. Gentleman consult on the subject of whether some of the future pensions in some specific dioceses should be paid from the centre?

Mr. Bell: The hon. Gentleman is right. The Pensions Measure received Royal Assent at Eastertime. The actual surplus figures reflect a programme of cutting expenditure and rebalancing the allocation of assets. The aim is to bring the commissioners' assets and liabilities into a more sustainable balance. On that basis—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would agree—the commissioners can better preserve their support for the needier dioceses and parishes.

Relationship with Parliament

37. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if the Church Commissioners will review their relationship with, and accountability to, Parliament. [2033]

Mr. Stuart Bell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. We should certainly wish to review the role of Parliament in relation to the Church and we should wish to begin with the Question Time which we have available by leave of the Speaker and the leadership of the House. Obviously, it is not enough to have a five-minute question spot in order to deal with all questions regarding the Church.

Mr. Mackinlay: With the greatest respect to the Church of England and the commissioners, may I invite my hon. Friend to consider that, in a modern democratic Parliament containing—at the very most—a minority of Members who are communicants of the Church of England, it is not sensible or right to have a parliamentary Question Time for this function? Even while the Church remains established, should not the commissioners come to Parliament and have their powers and jurisdiction repatriated to them so that they can make their own statutes? It is not the function of a modern Parliament to have questions answered relating to just one denomination: it is time for a review.

Mr. Bell: My hon. Friend is making the case for a disestablished Church. That is not a matter for the commissioners. We in this Parliament have to ensure that there is no disestablishment by stealth or by disorganisation. At the moment, Church and Parliament are as one; it would be for others to open any debate on the subject of establishment.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: I am reminded by a colleague that, when the Welsh Church was disestablished, the money went not to the Church but to the universities. I, too, welcome the hon. Gentleman to his responsibilities. We are grateful to the commissioners for coming to Parliament and talking to the Ecclesiastical Committee. It has proved an advance that the early stages of Church legislation should be considered by Synod rather than going through all stages in this House.

Perhaps we might have a day's debate in a year or two on general Church issues, when the sort of point made by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) could be aired. We need to consider not only legislation but a wider review of the work of the Church—which has more to do with Bible than balance sheets.

Mr. Bell: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments. The distinction between Bible and balance sheet was no doubt clear in the minds of those who wished for my appointment. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding us that Lloyd George disestablished the Church in Wales. Once it was disestablished, he forgot about it and went on to higher things.

I hope, during the years leading up to the millennium, for greater Church participation in this Parliament. After all, the millennium is the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Questions to Ministers

3.31 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I ask for your guidance, and I draw to the attention of the House what I believe to be the unreasonable withholding of information by the Government and contradictory parliamentary answers given in the *Official Report*.

Last week, I asked each Department for the numbers and percentages of documents passed to the Public Record Office in 1996. Some Departments replied that producing the information would incur "disproportionate cost". Other Departments, however, produced the information. The wording used in the questions—about what happened in particular cases and to particular documents—was identical to the form of question used by my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Mr. Fearn) in the *Official Report* of 2 July 1990, at column *426*. At the time, the Department of Trade and Industry answered each question to within one decimal point; yet the same Department—in the form, this time, of the Minister responsible for consumer affairs—tells us seven years later that to collect the information would incur disproportionate cost.

With the Government not pursuing a freedom of information Bill, many Members of the House are concerned about the withholding of information—and such contradictory answers merely serve to underline their concern. Can you, Madam Speaker, help the House by ensuring that information that is properly requested is provided?

Madam Speaker: I have no responsibility for ministerial answers. I advise the hon. Gentleman, in his own best interests, to pursue the point with the Minister concerned.

Firearms (Amendment) Bill

Considered in Committee.

[Sir Alan Haselhurst *in the Chair*]

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): On a point of order, Sir Alan. I should be grateful for clarification of the money resolution of the Bill, to which the House gave a Second Reading last week. A number of amendments have not been selected and it is not my task to question Madam Speaker's selection, nor would it be correct for me to do so.

However, it has been suggested that the money resolution is tightly drawn and that, as some of the amendments have implications for Government expenditure that go beyond the provisions of the money resolution, they are out of order. If amendments are approved which involve additional financial expenditure by the Government, how do we set about amending the money resolution? It is so tightly drawn that there seems to be no scope for additional expenditure, which is why many perfectly good amendments cannot be selected by Madam Speaker, and are therefore not before us to debate this afternoon.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): All that I can say to the hon. Gentleman, which will not be to his pleasure, is that Ministers of the Crown have the initiative on expenditure matters, and it is therefore not possible to extend by amendments the expenditure implied by the Bill.

As a footnote on procedural matters, the Chairman of Ways and Means selects amendments for Committees of the whole House, not Madam Speaker.

Clause 1

Prohibition of small-calibre pistols

3.37 pm

Mr. Colvin: I beg to move amendment No. 7, in page 1, line 8, leave out

'the words "a small calibre-pistol" shall cease to have effect.'

and insert

'after the words "a small-calibre pistol" the words "which is incapable of holding more than one cartridge and is not derived from a multi-shot design" shall be inserted.'

The amendment attempts to persuade the Government that the Bill should provide for the retention of .22 small-calibre pistols in special circumstances. The noble Lord Cullen's report does not suggest that single-shot weapons are a danger to the public. On the contrary, paragraph 9.59 of his report says:

"While all firearms are by definition lethal an individual shot from a handgun, depending on the distance and calibre, may well be less lethal than a shot from a shot gun or a rifle. However, the multi-shot handgun, whether it is a self-loading pistol or a revolver, has the capacity by reason of its high rate of fire and speed of aim to kill or injure a greater number of people within a given short space of time than would be possible with any other type of firearm which is legally available".

Lord Cullen constructed his recommendations on that basic premise. He clearly distinguished between self-loading pistols and revolvers that are held for target shooting and "other types of firearms".

[Mr. Colvin]

The Bill is meant to deal with circumstances in which a system of control breaks down. In a tragedy like Dunblane, it is argued that too much damage can be done before control can be reimposed. That is not so, however, with a single-shot pistol, which is why Lord Cullen excluded it.

The speed of reloading of a pistol is relevant to the amendment. Most single-shot pistols require four or even five distinct movements to reload. The pistol must first be broken open, the spent cartridge removed, a new round picked up with the other hand and put into the breech, the breech closed and the trigger set. Only then is the pistol ready to be fired.

In competition precision shooting, it would take approximately a minute for the shooter to fire each shot. Sixty rounds in the hour is the recognised rate of fire by pistol shot in Olympic competitions.

Only about 5 per cent. of .22 pistols, and probably a smaller percentage of larger-calibre weapons, are single-shot. They are, however, useful at two ends of the sport—for the beginner, who uses a cheap gun for training, and for the expert, who has specially constructed guns for advanced competition.

On the question of convertibility from single-shot to multi-shot pistols or repeater, it was argued during the debates on the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 that existing multi-shot weapons could be converted to single-shot and then reconverted to multi-shot. In France, single-shot .22 pistols are subject to no controls of any kind. One can simply walk into a gun shop or even a supermarket and buy such a weapon, without any questions asked.

Many of those are revolvers which have had the revolving mechanism removed and the cylinder replaced by one with only a single chamber. Such single-shot pistols could be restored to multi-shot capacity if new parts, including a new cylinder, could be obtained, or if the single-shot cylinder were drilled out. In other cases, self-loading pistols are sold with the magazine removed and the magazine well blanked off.

The amendment takes account of that extreme scenario, as it does not permit pistols that are derived from a multi-shot design.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North–East Bedfordshire): I notice that the Minister of State is listening carefully, for which we are grateful. My hon. Friend noted that single-shot pistols are available in France. He may have noticed that I got rather a dusty answer from the Minister when I raised that point in the main debate. The Minister said:

"The right hon. and learned Gentleman clearly has a total lack of faith in Customs or any controls on our borders. It is untrue to say that people can wander into this country with guns."—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 1242.]

Does my hon. Friend know of any regular checking of motor cars coming in, for example, at Dover, to see whether they carry a pistol?

Mr. Colvin: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for that intervention. The question is best put to the Minister responsible for Customs and Excise. As far as I am aware—this is based only on anecdotal evidence—there are no such checks. The apprehension of someone importing such weapons would presumably occur by chance, and that import would merely add to the estimated 2,500 illegal weapons going into circulation in this country every week.

It must be recognised that most of the weapons about which we should be concerned in any debate about firearms are those in illegal circulation, not those that are legally held by perfectly law-abiding people taking part in a sport in which the United Kingdom is particularly successful.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): On a point of order, Sir Alan. It is my understanding that it is customary for the Department responsible for a Bill to ensure that priority notice questions are answered by 3.30, where they pertain to the debate in Committee on the Floor of the House that day. I have just been speaking to the Message Board staff, and I was told that the Home Office questions which I tabled—Nos. 173, 176, 181, 187, 194 and 205—have not yet even reached the Hallkeeper's Lodge, let alone the Members' Letter Board.

Can you, Sir Alan, make the necessary order to require that those questions, which were tabled at the first available opportunity, should be answered in time for this afternoon's debate? I remind the Chamber that the Home Secretary made several observations during the Second Reading debate last Wednesday, and today is the earliest opportunity to answer queries arising from those observations. I hope that those answers will be provided by 3.30 this afternoon.

The Chairman): The hon. Member will know, from his own ministerial experience, that plans sometimes can go awry. He will know also that it is not for the Chair to ensure that such things occur. However, the Ministers on the Treasury Bench have heard the hon. Gentleman's remarks, and I am sure that they will try to oblige him if they possibly can in order to assist the proceedings of the Committee.

Mr. Colvin: To bring the debate back on course—

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): Back on target.

Mr. Colvin: Indeed.

It might be worth while reminding the Committee of the remarks of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) about the existing legislation in the aftermath of the Cullen report. He said:

"We believe that a distinction needs to be made between high-calibre handguns, which are principally made for police and military use, and .22 rimfire handguns, which are largely intended for target shooting. Although Lord Cullen decided against making such a distinction, he sets out in paragraph 9.49 of his report a table that demonstrates that a .22 handgun is some four to six times less powerful than higher-calibre handguns.

In paragraph 9.44, Lord Cullen points out that the expansion in the use of high-calibre handguns has even made many shooters concerned about the use of such guns as symbols of personal power. In addition, target shooting with .22 handguns has been an Olympic sport since 1896. There will be exceptions for the very few professionals, such as vets, who need handguns outside gun clubs for the humane destruction of animals."—[*Official Report*, 16 October 1996; Vol. 282, c. 832–33.]

That quotation appears in the Library's brief, "Prohibiting Handguns: the Firearms (Amendment) Bill", dated 9 June 1997, which I recommend to those participating in the debate. It is a fair, broad and detailed summary of past and present legislation in that area.

The Government propose the Bill on the basis of their manifesto commitment to ban all handguns, including .22s. In view of the emotion generated in the aftermath of the Dunblane tragedy and the highly successful Snowdrop campaign, one can understand why Members of Parliament on the eve of a general election took extremely seriously the points raised during the campaign. I believe that a petition was presented to No. 10 Downing street and to the then Leader of the Opposition. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Labour party manifesto contains a commitment to ban all handguns, and that the present Prime Minister has backed the campaign.

However, I believe that the amendment standing in the name of my hon. Friends and myself lets the Government off the hook. I do not believe that they have really thought it through, that the Government have considered seriously the impact of a ban on all .22 calibre pistols. I do not think that they have given careful thought to the possibility of excluding single-fire .22 pistols for competition shooting.

The debate has been surrounded by much emotion—I think too much. Emotion has clouded many of the speeches in this place—although a majority have opposed not only this Government's proposals but the previous Government's approach to firearms legislation. Therefore, it is important to know what we are talking about when we come to these debates.

If ever we needed a reason for retaining the Palace of Westminster Shooting Range—which is located in the bowels of the earth, where Guy Fawkes left his gunpowder in hope of blowing the place sky high—it is that.

On many occasions, I have taken Members down to the Shooting Range. Many of them had never handled a rifle or pistol before. I took them to the range to explain what the sport was all about.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I hope that the hon. Gentleman will bear in mind something that is sometimes forgotten by hon. Members who refer to the Shooting Range. The range is a facility of the staff's social club. It is not a provision made for the benefit of Members. In effect, the range belongs to the staff of the House, many of whom participate in its use.

Mr. Colvin: The right hon. Gentleman is right. We must not digress, but the club has a wide membership. More of its members are staff than Members or Members of the other place. Some women are members, and it is used by the police.

My remarks so far can be summed up in one phrase: disasters produce bad law. The Bill is potentially bad law.

The Government's decision to support a ban was rooted in the highly emotional atmosphere post-Dunblane and before Lord Cullen reported. The general public experienced the same initial reaction. Since then, however, public support for a ban has fallen away. Public opinion now takes a more measured judgment based on Lord Cullen's recommendations. On Second Reading, the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) certainly put on record the evidence that stems from our post bags, which is heavily weighted by those who are opposed to the proposed legislation.

After a thorough inquiry, Lord Cullen stated in his report:

> "I do not consider that the banning of handguns for target shooting or the banning of shooting clubs would be justified."

I think that that says it all. A complete ban is a hangover from the immediate aftermath of the Dunblane tragedy. It would be unfortunate if it were introduced now, when calmer judgments prevail.

The 1997 Act has introduced draconian controls. The controls and regulations are more stringent than those that are in place anywhere else in the world. Nothing further will be gained in terms of public security by a complete ban. At the same time, retaining the Act may enable United Kingdom participation in an Olympic sport to survive. The Act should be given the chance to succeed before we go down the path that is set out in the Bill.

I do not think that there is any convincing evidence that the private and legal ownership of handguns is linked to crime. Almost everyone acknowledges that the proposed Act will do nothing to reduce the illegal ownership of guns that underpins criminal activity. To extend prohibition still further without giving time to assess whether it will have that effect would be an injustice to law-abiding people, in the absence of any compensating benefit to the public.

Participants in target shooting with handguns are a minority, but they are a minority within a very popular sport. These people are law-abiding, and cause no disturbance to others. The noise involved in the use of .22s is minimal. We are talking of some of the most security-conscious and pro-law-enforcement people.

There may be occasions when the rights of such people need to be overridden in the interests of security. At the same time, the onus is on the state to show that that is necessary. I believe that in this instance it has manifestly failed to meet that onus. Parliament's role in the defence of individual rights is never more crucial than when minority groups do not command popular and media favour.

One has also to take into account the fact that shooting is now the fastest growing participative sport in the United Kingdom. It is the second most popular sport after fishing. I should explain just what single-shot pistols do as far as competition shooting is concerned. I refer not to centrefire pistols, which, rightly, are now outlawed, but to rimfire pistols—.22 calibre pistols—which are the subject of the amendment.

Internationally and domestically, the only competition where a single-shot pistol is required is the 50 m free pistol event, a competition that is shot at Olympic, world, Commonwealth and European championships as well as at national and club level. Domestically, most .22 competitions at national and club level could be shot with .22 pistols without altering the rules, or with just a small variation in timings. Most shooting could be done with .22 single-shots—

The Chairman: Order. I have taken note of the scope of the hon. Gentleman's speech in introducing his amendment, and he seems to be straying into territory that I might have expected to be covered in the debate on new

[Mr. Colvin]

clauses 3 and 4. If excluding the hon. Gentleman from talking about new clauses 3 and 4 might unduly constrict him, and, indeed, other hon. Members who were hoping to contribute, it might be convenient for the Committee if I were to revise my provisional selection of amendments to include these new clauses in this debate so that the discussion is not inhibited. We seem to have already covered part of the ground that I would have expected under the other debate.

Mr. Colvin: Do I take it that that is your ruling, Sir Alan, or are you offering to extend the scope of the debate to include that, because—

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): It is a warning shot.

Mr. Colvin: Indeed.

I would far rather confine my remarks more specifically to amendment No. 7 rather than try to extend the scope of the debate. I am sure that other hon. Members, some of whom are not in the Chamber at the moment, will speak on the new clauses that you mentioned, Sir Alan. Could we discuss them later this afternoon?

The Chairman: It seems that my remarks may have found their target, so if the hon. Gentleman will speak very strictly to the terms of his amendment, my original selection can stand.

Mr. Colvin: Thank you, Sir Alan. I will confine my remarks to something that is more specific and somewhat more accurate.

In that connection, I should tell the Committee—this relates specifically to derivation from multi-shot designs to single-shot—that, in order to pass judgment on the amendment, it is important to have general information about what these pistols do, and to have some understanding of what the Olympic disciplines are.

Free pistol and rapid-fire pistol events require a very specialist pistol indeed. The free pistol is a single-shot pistol with a barrel in excess of 10 in. It has a large wooden grip that is usually made to encircle the shooter's hand. Prices of these pistols—a matter of some significance, because we may discuss compensation later on—vary quite considerably, from £750 for a single-hand free pistol to well over £1,200 for a new, top-of-the-line pistol, which would include the specialist grip.

These pistols are hardly appropriate for criminal use. They are quite impossible to get into someone's pocket, and they cannot be converted to multi-shot use. As this is the last type of weapon that any criminal would consider using to commit a crime, the national security argument falls.

To put the amendment into perspective, let us consider the number of shooters involved. The National Small-bore Rifle Association has no precise figures for participation in .22 shooting in competitions and leagues, but I believe that, in the Olympic disciplines, there are currently about 500 shooters in the country; but there are some 20,000 domestic and league shooters, and it is necessary to shoot at that level in order to be selected for international competitions.

4 pm

If all that is left is .22 pistol shooting, many centrefire shooters will convert to that type of shooting rather than give up the sport altogether. That is an important point, which has a direct bearing on the question of compensation.

It has been said many times that, following the ban on large-calibre pistols, shooters would convert to .22 pistols. Hopefully, the Government believe that, following the banning of .22 pistols, they will convert to rifles. There are not many specialist pistol clubs in the country. I believe that there are about 2,100 rifle clubs, and, according to the information that the Home Secretary gave me last week, there are 49 clubs exclusively for pistol shooters—a small percentage of the total.

The House should consider the amendment carefully. If the Government's proposal is enacted, Britain will be the only country to be banned from international pistol shooting competitions. The Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997, passed by the last Parliament, would at least have allowed our competitors to take part on the international stage in the three .22 calibre events in the Olympic and Commonwealth games.

This country has a long and honourable tradition in the sport of pistol shooting, a sport that Britain invented and has dominated for the past 100 years. It is a sporting success story for Britain. In the past 10 years of Commonwealth competition, our competitors have brought home 23 pistol shooting medals in the .22 calibre events alone.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid–Sussex): Does my hon. Friend agree that, if the House of Commons passed this pernicious and unjust legislation, it would affect not just the people he has rightly mentioned—who have conferred great honour on their sport—but the generations to come who will hope to succeed them? They will have no opportunity to train, and Britain, which has dominated the sport for generations, will cease to play a part in it, to the great disadvantage of our sporting reputation.

Mr. Colvin: I take my hon. Friend's point. As a former Minister for the Armed Forces, he will know that, in the forces, everyone is trained to handle firearms. The draconian measures proposed by the Government to control firearms will mean that that will be the last time many of those people will handle a firearm, and all the talent that has been so successful in the past will be wasted—unless, of course, they travel abroad and train and shoot there.

A sport that is one of the original 12 Olympic disciplines deserves the same recognition as more visible sports. It should not be lightly destroyed. That is why I hope that my hon. Friends, and the Committee as a whole, will support the amendment.

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): I begin by registering my disappointment at not having received from the Minister the responses to points made during last Monday's debate, which I was promised I would receive by today. I remind the Committee that in 1940 Winston Churchill commented that we were not only without an Army, but bereft of people who were able to bear arms. History teaches us that we should not repeat our mistakes.

I remind my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that, in answer to a query from the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) about the ability of British competitors to train for and participate in the games, he said:

"I have not ruled that out altogether and if realistic representations are made to me, I shall think about the proposal. But I should require a high degree of convincing before going ahead with it."—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 1167.]

The simple fact is that we have not heard much cold, clinical logic in the debate, except in my contribution. I say that with suitable modesty.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): What was that word?

Mr. Cook: It is spelt m-o-d-e-s-t-y.

One of the points made with some validity by the anti-gun school of thought was that Thomas Watt Hamilton in Dunblane and Michael Ryan before him created a good deal of mayhem not because of their marksmanship and the accuracy with which the rounds were dispensed, but because the guns were multi-shot, and because Hamilton was able to reload. If the guns had not been multi-shot, the damage would not have been as horrendous.

The amendment is perfectly reasonable, sensible and realistic, and I appeal to my right hon. Friend to heed its proposals with care. It refers to specialised, target weapons that are meant for no purpose other than for shooting on a range where the shooter stands 25 m to 50 m away from a piece of cardboard. They are .22 calibre and, as the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) said, they have an inordinately long barrel to give the accuracy that is required in target shooting. The stock by which they are held is complex: the hand must fit into it like a glove. They cannot be pulled out of one's pocket, and they are difficult to carry—some of them are almost as long as a billiard cue. They are highly specialised weapons.

The hon. Member for Romsey said that such weapons can cost up to £1,200. Some international competitors' weapons are worth well in excess of £3,000, because they are custom-designed and built and carry counter-weights according to the strength of the individual using them. That is not the sort of weapon that someone will pick up and use to assassinate people. As I said a few days ago, an assassin will not identify the quarry, select a vantage point, calculate the field of fire, estimate the time of arrival and when to loose off a shot, and then say, "Heavens, I cannot use this because it is a .22 and it is illegal." The whole idea is preposterous.

I appeal to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to keep faith with his undertaking last week to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed by considering this realistic proposal. It relates specifically to the group of people whose rights we choose to defend—the high-grade competitors. The measure would be a stop-gap, because it would cater only for the needs of those who are accustomed to competing. It would be exceedingly difficult for young competitors, or even old ones who are just entering the sport, to gain some recognition, because they would find it difficult to acquire the kind of weapons that we are debating. The amendment would enable competitors with an international reputation and who strike fear into only one class of people—those who compete for other nations—to stop those of other nationalities from gaining the prestigious awards that our people are capable of winning.

Once again, I appeal to the Home Secretary to appreciate the realistic nature of the proposal. I urge him to concede even at this late stage that the amendment is reasonable and rational; it threatens no one and would preserve a corner of this sport for this country.

Mr. Soames: I warmly endorse the words of the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), whose stand on this matter the Committee should admire and respect. I especially endorse the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin). Perhaps the Home Secretary will detail his reasons for not accepting this simple change. I fear that his reasons will be unsatisfactory, not least because they will be advanced by officials on the ground that they were not invented here. The amendment is a sensible, careful, deliberate, pragmatic attempt to allow Great Britain to remain in her rightful place at the summit of an important sport.

Many years ago, some of us gave up trying to make Labour appreciate anything to do with the countryside or the importance of the cadet forces and their right to learn to bear arms and train under the most rigorous and strict conditions, in which safety and skill at arms play an important part. We know that the Home Secretary does not have a clue about that, that he does not understand it and that it means nothing to him.

Britain's shooting sports play a significant part in the life of the broad shooting community. It is quite wrong for pistol shooters to be marked out in this way. Even our sensible and realistic attempt to enable Britain to continue to compete and train people is not to be granted. These people are not madmen who have been granted gun licences simply because one police force failed to do its duty. They will be for ever denied the right to continue to take part in an honourable sport, which they love and which is part of the fabric of this country.

The Labour party cannot go round just banning things arbitrarily; I understand that a fox hunting Bill is to come before the House. There are endless examples of a high-handed, ignorant approach to such matters, and Conservative Members beg the Home Secretary to consider carefully what justice there is, what point there is in sacrificing something that many people do so well and which gives them such responsibility and respect.

4.15 pm

Mr. Colvin: The Committee must understand, and I am sure that my hon. Friend agrees with this, that sacrifices are already being made by competition pistol shooters. The rapid-fire pistol competition for the Olympics has already been sacrificed—I do not think that anyone in his wildest dreams is going to try to make the case for retaining that—as has the Olympic sport pistol event for ladies, which involves an automatic .22 pistol, so two out of three .22 events are already being sacrificed to the dogma of the Labour party. We want to try to preserve only the last remaining one—the single-shot event.

Mr. Soames: I agree with my hon. Friend and am grateful to him for pointing that out so powerfully.

[Mr. Soames]

In my constituency, I am a keen shooter, and a number of gun clubs are deeply unhappy at what the Home Secretary is doing. Many Conservative Members had to swallow hard to support what my old Government did in going further than Cullen, but we did swallow it. However, this is a step too far and I beg the Home Secretary to consider with great care whether it is really worth while, having gone the distance already, to lock out from international sport something that confers great honour on this country's sporting achievement.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I support the amendment, so ably moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin), and the comments of the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) and—until he mentioned fox hunting—of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Sussex (Mr. Soames). I wonder whether the Labour party has completely lost sight of the original causes of the desire, which was felt by hon. Members on both sides of the House, to control the use of handguns. The massacre at Dunblane could not have been carried out with a single-shot .22 pistol—if such a massacre had been started using such a weapon, the murderer could have been stopped and overpowered. When the Labour party opposed our more modest measure, its rhetoric was that it wanted to stop Dunblane happening again so far as it was able to do so. Even Labour Members admitted that no measure was absolutely going to guarantee that there would not be another massacre.

It is odd, therefore, that the Labour party has not taken that logic into account in proposing its total ban. The extremely small concession that is being sought through the amendment—and it is extremely small—would make it possible to prevent, as far as it is possible ever to prevent, the sort of thing that happened at Dunblane. It would give the public much greater protection and, at the same time, preserve, to a very limited extent, but at least to some extent, a perfectly legitimate sport, which is not only for entertainment, but which tests ability, which maintains our international reputation and which does no harm when lawfully and responsibly practised.

The inclusion of the words:

"and is not derived from a multi-shot design"

obviates the only real practical objection to the amendment, which is that it could be open to abuse. I cannot envisage someone going to such lengths as having a gun converted and then reconverted deliberately to evade the law. If such a person were wholly intent on evading the law, there would be no difficulty in his doing so illegally, rather than going to great lengths to get round a legal provision.

The amendment asks for only a small concession, but it would bring modest comfort to those who practise a perfectly legitimate sport. The Government's line is authoritarian, similar to their line in many of their other dealings since they came to power. They appear to take no account of law-abiding minorities. They certainly seem to take no account of public opinion, which has substantially shifted since the initial horror of Dunblane.

I ask the Home Secretary to consider accepting the amendment, even at this late hour. If he will not, will he explain to the Committee what on earth could be the danger of creating another Dunblane or Hungerford with a single-shot .22 weapon that cannot be derived from a multi-shot design? The amendment is so very carefully restricted and prescribed that I cannot imagine that any of the dangers that we are seeking to prevent would arise. I ask the right hon. Gentleman carefully to consider the amendment.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) has, extremely succinctly, posed the key question in the debate, so I shall try not to labour it too much, but rather enhance it a little.

The Home Secretary has been perfectly straightforward in saying that he does not wish to interfere with the rights of minorities further than is necessary in the interests of public safety. We are conscious that we cannot win the votes. However, we can put forward arguments which—and I put this in a non-contentious way—we can share with the Government and hope to persuade them to accept. The amendments that have been tabled contain arguments that deserve the most careful consideration. I believe that the Government could feel able to accept them and so avoid the victory to which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Sussex (Mr. Soames) referred—of which I am happy to acquit the Home Secretary, but which is a danger from some of those who sit behind him. I hope that he will not think that over-offensive to his party; I believe that it is a genuine danger.

The principle that we are discussing focuses on the question of the single-shot handgun. We have to be careful not to pick around in Lord Cullen's report. Indeed, one could argue almost anything from the report. I think that there was some support for that view in the winding-up arguments on Second Reading.

The single-shot pistol, which cannot be mechanically changed to become a multi-shot pistol, and which is used for highly specialised competitions, is about as unsuitable for use in a massacre as anything that one could devise. The question—and I am sure that the Secretary of State and the Minister will focus on this—is not whether a single-shot pistol is lethal, as any pistol, shotgun or rifle is lethal; it is whether there is sufficient danger to the public in permitting the use of single-shot pistols under confined circumstances that they must be banned together with all other pistols.

The hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) and my hon. Friends—including my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin), who tabled amendment No. 7 in a manner that has been carefully argued and proposed by the British Shooting Sports Council and those involved in Olympic and Commonwealth sports—made the case for allowing an exemption for the weapons that we are debating under the amendment. I appreciate, however, that Ministers may wish to consider more carefully one aspect of the amendment, which would allow single-shot pistols to be kept at home.

There is an argument for saying that such weapons should be confined to clubs, although Lord Cullen's report—which I mentioned earlier in my speech—states that keeping weapons in clubs will not provide absolute security. In this debate, however, we are not questioning whether we can provide absolute security, but considering how to strike a balance. Ministers would be doing everything that they could reasonably be expected to do in

providing for public safety—I believe that they are going further than is necessary, but in this debate, we are focusing on a specific aspect of the issue—even if they were to permit use of single-shot pistols for purposes of competition and training before competition.

As my hon. Friends have already eloquently stated, many Olympic and Commonwealth competitions depend on the use of some type of pistol, and those competitions would be facilitated by allowing the use of specialised single-shot pistols. If we passed the amendment, at least .22 calibre competitions could continue, and that is a highly desirable objective. The Government should allow those competitions to continue.

In urging a balance of argument on the issue, I revert to the point about the ease with which such pistols can be brought into the United Kingdom, because we should not blind ourselves to that part of the argument. Conservative Members are urging that British citizens who are properly licensed and in very closely confined conditions should be able to hold and use specialised single-shot pistols.

The fact remains, however, that .22 single-shot pistols—which are not particularly suitable for competitions, but perfectly capable of killing people—can be bought across the counter in France. Anyone can drive in and out of the United Kingdom—whether at Dover, Folkestone, Le Havre or Portsmouth—on any of the ordinary sea ferries with such weapons.

It is no criticism of customs officers—I ask the Minister to prick up his ears—to say that they do not go through cars with a fine-toothed comb. Customs officers allow ordinary English citizens to pass through with nothing more than what was once described as a "Bangemann wave" of a passport. Consequently, if an evil-minded loner were minded to use a .22 pistol—which is unlikely; he would be much more likely to go for one of the many thousands of illegally held heavy-calibre pistols—he could bring it into the United Kingdom with absolute impunity and virtually no prospect of being caught.

There is a strong argument in principle for passing the amendment, and no significant danger to the public in practice. Conservative Members very much hope that Ministers will sympathetically examine the aspect of the issue dealt with in the amendment.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I should like to reinforce some of the comments made by my hon. Friends and by the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook). I should also like to draw attention to the specific consequences for the Olympic movement if the Bill is passed without amendment No. 7.

My hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) rightly talked about the great significance of shooting in the Olympics. Today, however—like many other hon. Members—I received a letter from Mr. Simon Clegg, the general secretary of the British Olympic Association. It states:

"Whilst the British Olympic Association welcomes tighter firearms control which will ensure that tragedies such as Hungerford and Dunblane are never repeated we are concerned about the impact that the proposed legislation will have on competitive pistol shooting in this country.

The legislation, as it stands, will effectively preclude representation by British athletes at future Olympic Games in the three Olympic shooting disciplines concerned. With 135 national federations competing for 20-30 places in each discipline there is a significant level of training and commitment necessary to achieve an Olympic quota place. Forcing competitive pistol shooting abroad will kill the sport and with it the necessary depth to ensure international representation at the highest level."

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) rightly stressed the distinguished record of British competitors.

The amendment—

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): On a point of order, Sir Alan. I have been listening to the hon. Gentleman's contribution and feel that he is debating new clause 3 or 4, not amendment No. 7.

The Chairman: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman has been here for the whole debate. I have already tried to gauge the mood of the Committee on this particular matter. My provisional selection separated the two debates, but there appeared to be some element of overlap. I have tried to be as tolerant as I can, but I stress again that if it is convenient to have a separate debate on new clauses 3 and 4, we have to confine this debate as tightly as possible to amendment No. 7.

4.30 pm

Mr. Hawkins: I am grateful to you for your ruling, Sir Alan. Of course, I have been present for the whole debate and heard what you said earlier. I am seeking to reflect not only earlier contributions about the sporting significance of the legislation, but the fact that the amendment is designed to enable competition to continue.

The Government have to consider carefully the mischief that they are trying to prevent. If the mischief that they are trying to prevent is the repetition of what happened at Hungerford or Dunblane, they must reflect on whether it is necessary to ban single-shot weapons. There is a serious problem if the legislation does not in fact prevent the repetition of similar tragedies, but succeeds only in preventing sporting competition for many law-abiding citizens who present no real risk.

I draw the Government's attention to what the press has said. Last October, *The Sunday Times* said:

"We believe the argument for permitting sporting use of .22 handguns is a strong one".

This is an extremely important matter in terms of the rights of the minority of citizens who enjoy their sport. Even at this very late stage, it is perfectly possible for the Government to reconsider and decide that in this case the balance comes down in favour of permitting single-shot handguns because they do not pose the same kind of threat. That would enable participants in sport to enjoy their pleasure.

Mr. Peter Atkinson: It is proper for me to declare an interest at the start of the proceedings. I am a consultant to the British Field Sports Society, but I make it clear that the use of handguns has a very limited application in country sports. Nevertheless, the British Field Sports Society is a member of the British Shooting Sports Council, which is an umbrella body representing those using handguns for target shooting.

It is the job of the House to look after the interests of minorities and I believe that the amendment will help to safeguard the interests of a small but nevertheless significant and law-abiding minority—those who practise target shooting to a high level of skill. All sorts of things

[Mr. Peter Atkinson]

are said during election campaigns and the parading of the Snowdrop petition at the Labour party conference was, no doubt, seen as a useful political stunt, although some of us found the sentimentality surrounding it a little sickening. I suppose that the Labour party thought that "Ban all handguns" was a nice, simple message, but that "Ban all handguns except .22 single-shot handguns" would be off message and would therefore fall foul of its spin doctors.

I urge the Government to reconsider their position. The Home Secretary made it absolutely clear that the purpose of the extension of the prohibition of handguns to .22s was to prevent another Dunblane, but how will the Government's refusal to accept our amendment do anything to prevent another Dunblane?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) said, single-shot target pistols are singular weapons. Some time ago, I was shown one by a practitioner of the sport and it was a revelation to me. Like many people, I thought that a .22 handgun was a small weapon that could be easily concealed, but in fact the weapon is almost 18 in long—I am told that, if the barrel were a few millimetres longer, it would be categorised as a rifle. It is virtually impossible to hide such a weapon with any part of one's body. The other significant feature of the weapons is the way in which the stock is designed. The stock goes almost around the wrist so that, in a sense, the gun almost becomes part of the hand. The weapon that I saw has an electronic trigger—it is a highly sophisticated weapon—and the loading procedure is extremely complicated and slow. I am told that in Olympic contests the rate of fire is a maximum of 60 rounds in a two-hour period, which shows how slow and difficult loading those weapons is.

It is nonsense to suggest that someone like Thomas Hamilton would have used such a weapon, but if he had done so, he would have had to have gone into the school at Dunblane with the weapon practically attached to his wrist and with cartridges in his pocket, in which he would have had to scratch around in order to load the weapon between shots. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) said, it would have been a slow process and he could have been easily overpowered at that point.

We are asking the Government to reconsider and to accept the amendment, which is especially important because it would allow the tradition of Olympic shooting to continue. We now spend millions of pounds of lottery money encouraging participation in sport and we want to do better in international team events. It is therefore perverse that we are going to destroy our ability to participate in one of the oldest Olympic disciplines. As those who read the Sunday newspapers will know, we are forcing people from gun clubs as far north as Aberdeen to go to France to practise. That is fine if one can afford the air fare and the time to go to Dieppe, where I understand some British shooters have registered at a local club, but it is nonsense to force people to do that to practise a skill and a sport that they love. It is illogical for our shooters to have to train with the French—I fear that the Duke of Wellington would be spinning in his grave if he knew.

The sport of shooting single-shot .22 pistols is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey said, the crème de la crème of the shooting disciplines and we should be able to continue to participate in it. I therefore urge the Government to consider the amendment carefully. It would not be a loss of face for the Government to move away from the position that they hold with almost dogmatic fervour. We have moved sufficiently far away from the tragedy of Dunblane to re-examine the issue in the cold light of day. I should welcome it if we could persuade the Government to row back on their absolute prohibition and allow this valuable sporting discipline to continue.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): We have come a long way from the position in law when the extremely tragic events of Dunblane took place. The previous Government's Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 outlawed high-calibre pistols. It did not take into account the recommendations contained in Lord Cullen's extremely detailed inquiry that high-calibre and much more dangerous pistols than those mentioned in the amendment should be banned, not only from people's private homes where they had previously been allowed, but from gun clubs. Some of us had strong views on Lord Cullen's recommendations and the amendments to the law proposed in the previous Act.

However, the Bill goes significantly further than the previous legislation. Under the current law, anyone may possess .22 pistols in his home if he has a firearms certificate. He does not have to hold them in a gun club or use them under supervision, but can use them provided that he has a firearms certificate. Without banning .22 rimfire pistols, we could perfectly reasonably ensure that they had to be held in a gun club—which would have to be properly licensed by the police—and used under proper supervision. We could ensure that someone could hold only one competition pistol. Such measures would enormously reduce the balance of risk.

Will the Minister of State tell us how many fatalities and how many serious injuries are caused by the relatively safe .22 rimfire single-shot pistols? I believe that the number of fatalities is incredibly small—I doubt whether there are more than a few every year. We should be making better use of our time if we considered that fact in the context of the fatalities caused by illegally held firearms and the part that they play in armed crime.

However, we have been placed on this ground by the Government through their introduction of the Bill. I appeal to the Minister of State to think carefully about the lethality of the guns under discussion. During the course of the previous Firearms (Amendment) Bill I entertained a senior police officer to lunch in the House. Our conversation turned to the lethality of such guns. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "I would rather that any of my officers were faced at short range by a high-calibre pistol—not just a .22 pistol—than by a double-barrelled shotgun." Everyone knows that, at short range, a double-barrelled shotgun puts a big hole through a body. A .22 pistol makes a hole of about a quarter of an inch and, unless the bullet happens to hit a vital vessel in the body, it will not kill.

Mr. Soames: I hope that my hon. Friend will not proceed too far down this road, otherwise we shall find the Labour party banning shotguns.

Mr. Clifton–Brown: The thought had occurred to me, but we must put the issues in context and speak out about the realities of life. The Bill's approach to the balance of risk is nonsense.

How many illegal weapons will be driven underground by the measure? We had that argument during our discussion of the previous Firearms (Amendment) Bill. My guess is that the weapons will flood in from the continent. It will not matter how well firearms are supervised, people will still want to use weapons illegally. Now we have banned high-calibre pistols, it would be far better to encourage this country's law-abiding citizens to switch to relatively low-risk weapons. In that way, those people could continue to enjoy themselves; they would be listed on proper police registers and their weapons would be kept on firearms certificates instead of being driven underground.

4.45 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that, if the legislation is passed, those who legally own guns will be forced to hold the guns illegally in a subversive way? Where would they use the guns? Why would somebody who currently holds a legitimate gun licence and a .22 pistol for target and competition shooting want to hold that gun illegally? Where would he use it?

Mr. Clifton–Brown: The hon. Gentleman obviously does not live in the real world. If he considered what was happening in the United States and the number of illegally held firearms there, he would know that what I am saying is true. An element in this country would want to use the firearms illegally. Both the hon. Gentleman and I would deplore that, but we must acknowledge the realities of life.

I appeal to the Minister of State on two grounds. First, on the balance of risk, how lethal are those weapons? Secondly, what is the point of setting up a specialist inquiry only to have politicians second-guess its recommendations? How many more of the numerous inquiries that the Government are setting up will subsequently be second-guessed and their recommendations not accepted? We might as well choose a lord and tell him not to carry out an in-depth inquiry or take all the evidence, but to put a few points on the back of a fag packet: if we like the recommendations, we shall accept them and turn them into law; if we do not like them, we shall not accept them. That seems to be what is happening in the Bill.

Mr. Frank Cook: I should like to clarify a point that was raised a couple of minutes ago by the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock). He asked whom the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton–Brown) had in mind when he said that someone holding a legal firearms certificate now would want to go underground with his weapon. That will not happen: such a person is a law-abiding custodian of a firearm. The hon. Gentleman misses the point about the danger involved. Many people on the streets already illegally own the weapons to which he refers—they are not necessarily target weapons, but are multi-shot, small weapons that they can carry. The legislation will not touch such people. That is the point.

Mr. Clifton–Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that intervention as it gives me the chance to clarify my remarks. If owning such a weapon remains legal, everyone who wishes to fire pistols in competitions and to keep weapons in a registered firearms armoury has the opportunity to do so. If the Bill makes that illegal, people will no longer have that opportunity. I can foresee circumstances—which will probably not involve current firearms certificate holders—in which some people, possibly younger people, will want to fire pistols illegally and will obtain their weapons on the black market.

I ask the Minister of State to consider what he is doing today and to see whether it would be possible, in the closely defined circumstances that I have described—using only one weapon in a registered gun club under proper supervision with a proper firearms licence from the police—to accept the amendment, even if it has to be redrawn.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I shall ask the Government three short questions, in the hope of bringing them round to a different way of thinking.

I trust that the Government have listened with care, not only to Conservative Members of Parliament, who have spoken with knowledge and passionate interest in the matter, but to the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), who is a consistent advocate of the arguments that he advanced this afternoon. I ask the Government to listen to him with all humility, because he has nothing to gain politically from what he says, and so can argue with the force of principle. I salute him for the stance that he has taken tonight and at other times. His arguments bear listening to. I hope that, by pointing him out, I have done him no damage.

I confess that, on Second Reading of the Conservative Government's Firearms (Amendment) Bill in November 1996, I refused to support the Government and absented myself so as not to support the Bill. I trust that my remarks will be viewed in that light—I say that breathing down the neck of my right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Home Secretary.

First, I shall ask questions about the philosophy that underlies the Bill, clause 1 and the Government's opposition to amendment No. 7. I hope that I am not too pompous in describing it in those terms. Is it right that the Government's proposal should become law? We have been told about the innocent pastime of competition shooters. There is a shooting club in my constituency, in Kibworth, halfway between Market Harborough and Leicester. As a direct consequence of the Bill, members of that club will see an end to a pastime in which they have engaged for many years. Not one member of the club is the type of person who is likely to commit mayhem by running amok with a pistol—let alone a single-shot pistol, which the amendment is designed to retain in the sport of shooting.

The membership of clubs such as the one in my constituency is broadly composed of policemen, former policemen and ex-warrant officers from the armed forces—not the type of war comic strip cartoon heroes whom one would expect to run amok with a gun. It is important for the Government to realise that they are taking away from people in that respectable section of society a lawful pastime in which they have engaged innocently for very many years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) mentioned organisations such as the cadet forces. I believe that the type of people who, were the Bill

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

not to become law in the currently proposed form, would have joined, for example, the Kibworth shooting club, would have undergone weapons training in the cadet force even if they did not later join the Regular armed forces. I urge the Government to bear in mind what they are doing and whom they are harming.

Mr. Soames: My hon. and learned Friend has raised an important point about safety. Does he agree—the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), does not have a clue about this—that, regardless of whether their members have been cadets or members of the armed forces, all those clubs adopt the highest, most rigorous standards of safety in the handling of weapons and ammunition that one could find anywhere, and that that sets the sport apart from almost any other sport that one may watch in this country?

Mr. Garnier: I agree whole-heartedly with my hon. Friend. I know that from my experience, having visited the club in my constituency. I was told several times by the president, the captain, the secretary, the treasurer and other members of the committee of that club the precise and detailed training and arms drill that all members of that club must undergo before they are even allowed on to the range, let alone allowed to handle a gun with a potentially lethal projectile in it.

Mr. Frank Cook: Perhaps the hon. and learned Gentleman would care to observe that they must behave in that manner and with that type of discipline because it is the only level of safety that they can apply to themselves, so it is in their own interest. The whole sport is one of imposing, inculcating, fostering and improving safety standards.

Mr. Garnier: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I wish that the Government would give credit to those people and allow them to use single-shot guns safely. As has been explained several times, a single-shot gun is not the weapon that a maniac will choose if he wants to kill huge numbers of people.

The second broad question that I want to ask the Government is a question of practice. Will the Bill—and clause 1, which we seek to amend—achieve the intended purpose of preventing the Dunblanes and the Hungerfords? The short answer is, "No, of course it will not." The Government know that it will not but, unfortunately yet understandably, they have become bound up in the emotion that flowed from the terrible events at Dunblane.

No one would seek to diminish, devalue or denigrate the sincerity of the concern expressed by Ministers and supporters of the Government—and Opposition Members—for the parents and relations of the children who were brutally killed by that madman in Dunblane last summer. However, having studied the Cullen report, having considered the facts of that case, we now know the reasons why Hamilton committed those murders and, regrettably, a repeat of that situation would not be dealt with by this, albeit well-intentioned, clause.

There were huge numbers of failures, by the police and by the licensing authorities, regarding the culprit in that case. Regrettably, the Bill produced by the Government will have no effect on a future Dunblane. It may make the Government feel better, it may make other members of the public who support the general thrust of the Bill feel better, but it will not afford the children of equivalent primary schools throughout the United Kingdom, and parents of those children, any better protection. I suggest to the Committee, therefore, that the Bill and clause 1 will not achieve the intended purpose.

My final argument to the Government is encapsulated in the question, "Will the clause cause harm?" I hope that I have argued successfully that it will do no good, but will it cause harm? That comes back—

The Chairman: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. and learned Gentleman, but he appears to have moved on to making a speech that would be more suited to the clause stand part debate. I would remind him that we are debating the specific points made in amendment No. 7.

Mr. Garnier: I understand, Sir Alan, the feeling that you have about the half-completed sentence that I was uttering, but if I complete the sentence, I hope that I may persuade you that I am in order. I do not wish to be impertinent, but those of us who support the amendment are arguing for the retention within the law of single-shot .22 weapons, and I am asking the Government to justify the removal of single-shot .22 pistols from lawful ownership in certain prescribed situations.

It seems to me—I hope that the Government will answer this in due course—that the question, "Will the Bill, and will this clause, cause harm?" can be answered only in the affirmative unless the clause is amended by means of the amendment proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin).

I mentioned at the outset of my remarks the innocent, law-abiding, responsible gun owners who are about to see a long-practised pastime brought to an end if the Bill passes as the Government propose. That is a harm that the Government should not allow. It is a harm that cannot be compensated for even in money—and no doubt we shall have further discussions later in the Bill's passage about the level of compensation. I would suggest that, on all three of the grounds that I have presented, amendment No. 7 should be considered quietly and calmly by the Government, because I have yet to hear a reasonable, rational response to the points that I have put forward.

I urge the Government, despite their huge majority, to think a little more calmly and carefully about the effects of what they are doing, and to ask themselves, "Is it right? Will it do good or harm?" I believe that, if they think about those questions, they can reach only one answer in line with their responsibilities as the Government of the whole country, not just of some of its people. If they do that, there is only one conclusion to which they can come which will be in line with their responsibilities as the Government of the whole of this country, not just part of it.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I was happy to hear on Second Reading the Government's assurances that this matter would be considered on its merits. At one point in that debate, when I suggested that there was a philosophical divide between our party and the Government, the hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) stood up and assured me that there was no question of adopting a high moral stance: it was a question of examining the issues in a practical way.

Similarly, this moderate and well-reasoned amendment should be considered on the basis of its practical effects. I should be interested to hear the Minister of State explain in due course how the clause can be said to contribute to the safety of anyone, bearing it in mind that those who wish to act unlawfully and violently will still find ways of laying their hands on the necessary instruments.

5 pm

Accepting the amendment, on the other hand, would demonstrate Ministers' recognition of the fact that in certain strictly controlled circumstances it should still be possible to conduct a lawful sport. I therefore hope to hear that the Government are prepared to acknowledge that and to consider this practical issue on its merits.

I have heard it said during the debate that if all .22 weapons were banned, people would still act illegally. It is often maintained in the House that anyone who advances such an argument is condoning illegality. Nothing could be further from the truth. Those of us who try to lead law-abiding lives must often obey laws that we think may be wrong. I am sorry that the Home Secretary is not present to hear me say this, but I am sure he can remember times when he was in opposition when he told the House that certain measures introduced by the Conservative Government were wrong because they risked criminalising otherwise law-abiding people. That, surely, is the point.

The clause reduces the risks to such an absurdly low level—here I agree with everything the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) said—that those who regard the legislation as crass and idiotic will continue to practise their sport in the quarry behind the village. Such people will still be able to purchase .22 single-shot pistols on the black market. Such is the corrupting influence of badly thought out legislation, which criminalises a practice that ought to be kept lawful.

I for one have always maintained that if a law is passed people must obey it; but we should also consider the consequences of passing the law in the first place. This law will bring about corruption. Some people—not those who currently hold licences—will continue to use these weapons for recreational purposes. They will then be rightly prosecuted and criminalised.

Mr. Connarty: The hon. Gentleman was not here when the previous legislation was debated, but I wonder whether he would have used the same argument—that multi-shot weapons should not be banned because of the certainty that some people would get hold of them illegally and fire them off in quarries behind their homes. On the hon. Gentleman's logic, it was surely wrong to interfere with handgun possession of any kind.

Mr. Grieve: That is a perfectly fair point. Had I been here before the election I would have supported Lord Cullen's proposals in toto, but I would have voted against the proposals that came before the House. I accept what the hon. Gentleman says and repeat my point about absurdity. My impression is that those who are likely to handle .22 pistols of the single-shot variety will do so exclusively for sporting purposes, not for pernicious Rambo-like reasons. If those people think the law absurd, they will continue to practise their sport—that is the corrupting element. It is what the House, when considering legislation, should try to avoid.

I note that the Home Secretary has returned to his place. Two onerous aspects of the job of Home Office Ministers are balancing common sense against the desires of their Back Benchers, and protecting those who would otherwise be oppressed. This evening I hope to hear some good news from the Government, but my hopes are not high. Meanwhile I suggest that it is irrational to object to the amendment.

Mr. Chope: I hope that the Government will take the amendment seriously. It is an acid test of their attitude to liberty and the freedom of the individual.

Are the Government trying to accommodate, as far as possible, the legitimate interests of law-abiding sportsmen within the need for public safety, or are they using public safety as a catch-all justification for an absolutist, populist approach which appeals to the worst elements of the ignorant among our citizens? We know that 80 per cent. of all handguns are already banned. Paragraph 9.101 of the Cullen report says that single-shot pistols probably comprise about 5 per cent. of the total number of licensed weapons. So even with the amendment in place, 95 per cent. of all handguns would be banned.

The issue is one of assessing the risk. That should involve an examination of two elements in combination: as Cullen said, the chances of harm occurring, and the nature and extent of that harm.

I am rather alarmed by the Government's emerging attitude. Earlier today, I was waiting for an answer to a written question that I needed at 3.30 pm. I got the answer sooner rather than later as a direct result of the Home Secretary's intervention. I believe that answers are delivered by Departments to the House as early as 3.15 pm; the Home Secretary had confirmation from the Department that the answers were delivered here by that time today, but they did not reach the board until after 4.20 pm. Had it not been for the good offices of the Home Secretary, who had his staff fax copies of my answer to me—for which I am grateful—I would not have had access to it until that time.

Mr. Michael: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's acknowledgement of the fact that we made arrangements to have his answers faxed to him by the target time. I would gently remind him, however, that some of us who asked the former Government questions over the past 10 years often did not receive our answers until the following day—never mind 3.30 pm.

Mr. Chope: I am not sure whether two wrongs make a right, but I must make it clear that I can take no responsibility for anything that happened during the last Parliament. One aspect of this matter that has been raised with me is that up to 10 staff in the Messengers Office used to deal with questions and correspondence when they arrived in the afternoon. There are now only two members of staff, which may be one explanation why answers now take much longer to reach Members.

In written question 194, I asked the Home Secretary whether it was his policy to outlaw the possession and use of black powder pistols. The Minister of State answered that black powder pistols were

"synonymous with a muzzle-loading gun as defined in the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997. The Government have no plans at present to prohibit the possession of such weapons. The Firearms

(Amendment) (No. 2) Bill, which is presently before Parliament, deals only with the prohibition of small-calibre pistols. However, we shall keep under close review all controls on firearms to ensure maximum public safety."

I find the expression "maximum public safety" difficult because to ensure maximum public safety the Government would have to ban all shotguns and rifles, the sport of motor racing and air displays. It is impossible to ensure maximum public safety. What can be ensured is maximum public safety commensurate with individual liberty. I am sorry that the Minister of State did not respond in that way.

Mr. Michael: I am sorry that it is necessary to spell things out in such detail. I should have thought maximum safety clearly means maximum practical safety and I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman does not understand that.

There is no suggestion of widening the scope of the discussion. We were dealing with the fact that the police raised concerns about the availability of black powder pistols. That exclusion was introduced to the 1997 Act during its passage through Parliament—I believe that that amendment was introduced in another place. The police are concerned about the loophole, so it is right that we should keep it under review. Does the hon. Gentleman think that we should not keep safety under review?

Mr. Chope: I make no such suggestion. I had the opportunity during the last Parliament to serve on the Health and Safety Commission, a body committed to ensuring public safety as far as reasonably practicable. In the light of the Minister of State's intervention, perhaps I should table a pursuant question to ensure that we get on the record the fact that he did not intend "ensure maximum public safety" to mean anything other than to ensure maximum practical public safety. Those are two separate propositions. The Minister of State must be deemed to have had responsibility for his answers to those questions. He decided not to qualify the answer in its written form, but I welcome the qualification that he has just given.

As for single-shot muzzle-loading guns, I have information from the Christchurch gun club in my constituency, which has 500 members and is one of the most successful gun clubs in the country, that someone firing a black powder pistol at a 25 yd range has half an hour in which to make 13 shots and the three worst shots are disallowed. That is another example of pistol shooting where tremendously high skill is involved. It is akin to the sport of pistol shooting with a single-shot pistol. That is why I hope the Government will take the amendment seriously.

The Government have already earned among some people a reputation for being a little spoilsport. They have an opportunity this afternoon to accept the amendment and demonstrate that they are willing to accommodate the legitimate interests of the sporting fraternity. I therefore hope that they accept the amendment.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): My right hon. and hon. Friends have spoken in support of the amendment with notable moderation. The arguments that they have advanced deserve to be treated with proper respect and I hope that they will receive such a response from the Minister of State.

I hope that the Minister of State will take particular note of the tributes paid to the standards of safety observed in gun clubs. The mischief of the problem that we have been debating arises out of the fact that the Government now propose entirely to ban pistol shooting, particularly in gun clubs. During the passage of the earlier legislation, the Front Benches agreed that handguns should be banned from the home. That agreement, however, was reached and abided by in the context in which the ban was embodied in quite different legislation. That legislation enabled Olympic shooting to continue and .22 calibre pistol shooting, both single and multi-shot, to continue in gun clubs—not in people's homes. The Bill would put an end to pistol shooting in gun clubs, which is why the matter now needs to be reconsidered.

The effect on single-shot .22 calibre pistols is one of the most conspicuous and unfortunate consequences of the Bill. The force that lies behind the arguments that have been advanced by my right hon. and hon. Friends, and by the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook)—I am sorry, I should have mentioned him earlier when I referred to the cogency of contributions to this debate—derives entirely from the difference in the context of this legislation.

5.15 pm

My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and I will not resile from our earlier position that there should be a complete ban on the possession and use of pistols in the home. For that reason, and because the amendment would appear to allow pistols to be kept in the home, we shall not vote for it. Nevertheless, the arguments that have been put forward in this different context have considerable force and I hope that they will be treated in that way by the Minister of State when he replies.

Mr. Michael: I am pleased to confirm that we ensured that answers to questions were provided properly this afternoon and we shall seek to continue to do that. I mention that to reinforce the point that I made in interventions. I owe my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) an apology. I promised to provide him with a reply by today, but my reply has been delayed because I wanted it to be fuller and more accurate. He was right to say that I failed to achieve what I sought to do, but he will have that answer as quickly as possible.

I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) for his helpful comments. I am happy to follow him in paying tribute to the standards of safety operated in the generality of gun clubs and by the generality of shooters. A number of Conservative Members showed a good deal less respect for shooters in suggesting that, on the passage of this Bill, they will immediately go underground or use guns elsewhere. The right hon. and learned Gentleman made no such suggestion. Those suggestions were unhelpful and misleading because, in general, shooters are law-abiding citizens who, while they would not wish us to pass this legislation, will obey it once it becomes law.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Michael: I shall give way first to one of those who appeared to make just such an implication.

Mr. Grieve: Does the Minister agree that if it were possible to provide a legitimate and lawful way for the

sport of shooting with handguns to be maintained, if only with single-shot handguns for those wishing to engage in the sport recreationally, that would minimise the risk that people might act illegally in using handguns for recreational purposes?

Mr. Michael: I shall return to the point. We considered carefully whether it would be possible to protect the activities of shooters and members of gun clubs and, after examining Lord Cullen's report and the evidence presented to him, we came to the conclusion that it would not. Furthermore, the amendment would entail an unacceptable degree of inconsistency.

Mr. Frank Cook: Being a simple fellow, I always try to see things clearly. Is the Minister saying that evidence given to Cullen was inaccurate, or that Lord Cullen's recommendations were misleading? The comments that have just been made confuse me.

Mr. Michael: That goes a little wider than the debate, but it is clear that Lord Cullen's findings were based sincerely on the evidence that he heard during the inquiry. Many people gave a great deal of thought to the matter and we came to the conclusion, as did the representatives of police officers, that a complete ban on handguns was the right way forward.

That in no way denigrates Lord Cullen or his inquiry, or suggests that his findings were misleading. At the end of the day, it is the responsibility of the House, led by the Government, to reach conclusions. It is fair to say that when the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe was Home Secretary, he came to conclusions that went beyond Lord Cullen's recommendations. That was the exercise of proper judgment on the report and the evidence that was provided to the inquiry.

Several of the contributions to the debate require comment. The shadow Home Secretary said that the Bill would mean the end of pistol shooting in gun clubs. That was extensively debated on Second Reading.

The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) said that we should consider the chances of harm. However, we must also consider consistency and the ease of enforcement of legislation, which is what led chief police officers to express alarm at the idea that there would be only a limited ban on some handguns, rather than a consistent ban on handguns as a whole.

I appreciate that many hon. Members who have contributed to the debate disagree with the Bill as a whole. Some of the points that were made were Second Reading points, albeit addressed to the amendment. I do not think that a case has been made by the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) or other speakers, for single-shot small-calibre pistols to be exempted from the general prohibition on handguns. That, of course, is what the debate is about. I want to make it clear that we are not prepared to allow such an exemption.

Mr. Howard: The Minister referred—I may have misunderstood his reference—to the spokesman for chief police officers and the concerns that they had raised. In fact, the position of the Association of Chief Police Officers was as I set it out in my speech on Second Reading last week. ACPO supported the proposals of the previous Government. I know that certain other police associations took a different view, but the chief police officers supported not a total ban, but the position taken and enshrined in legislation by the previous Government.

Mr. Michael: Both the Police Superintendents Association and the Police Federation formally welcomed the stance that we took. The discussions that I have had with representatives of the Association of Chief Police Officers in recent weeks have focused more on remaining loopholes than on concern about our proposals. That has come clearly—

Mr. Howard *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Michael: The right hon. and learned Gentleman can shake his head as much as he likes. I am referring to the conversations and discussions that have informed our preparation for these debates and the introduction of the Bill.

Mr. Howard: I know nothing of private conversations or discussions that the Minister may have had. ACPO placed its view firmly on the record. I referred to that view in the debate last week. It was not challenged at the time, either by the hon. Gentleman or by the Home Secretary. It is firmly on the record. ACPO's on-the-record position, as set out by me in the debate last week, is in support of the legislation put on the statute book by the previous Government.

Mr. Michael: The Police Federation considered our proposals a victory for common sense. I say again to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that the comments that I have received from ACPO have been entirely about remaining loopholes—for instance, the one involving black powder guns to which I referred earlier. ACPO is anxious that there should be no loopholes in the availability of handguns. Our position is clear. Perhaps matters have moved on since the right hon. and learned Gentleman introduced his Bill.

Mr. Chope: Does the Minister think that it is the responsibility of the police to decide the law of this country, or will he, on behalf of the Government, accept responsibility for deciding the law?

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman did not raise that point when the shadow Home Secretary was quoting the Police Federation in support of anything that he did. It is reasonable for Members on either side to quote the views of police officers, particularly the representative bodies, when legislation which has implications for the police—in relation to enforcement or to their safety, as well as public safety—is under consideration in the House.

We have concluded that it was neither practical nor safe to allow the exemption suggested in the amendment. That is the answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), whose contribution was thoughtful and considered until she accused the Government of being authoritarian. We are trying to ensure consistency to bring about the protection of the public.

The number of small-calibre pistols in current ownership is small—perhaps only several hundred—but an exemption would mean an increase in that number.

[Mr. Michael]

In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North, I say that it could well mean an increase in the number of single-shot pistols of a quite different type from the specialist guns to which several hon. Members referred in the debate.

Mr. Peter Atkinson: As I recall, several Conservative Members pressed the Minister to explain how he thinks that not accepting the amendment would prevent another tragedy similar to that at Dunblane. So far, the only answer that he has given is about consistency. When we are dealing with the individual liberties of law-abiding citizens, surely we need a better excuse than that.

Mr. Michael: I am sorry—I was not addressing that point, and I am not sure that that is a good question. It is clear that the impact of single-shot pistols is not the same as that of multi-shot pistols. The question is whether we should ban all handguns, which is what the Bill seeks to do and on which there is considerable agreement, not least because of the view of the police that that is much easier to enforce and also makes it easier to distinguish when illegal guns are being carried. If pistols are not legal, it is clear that if one is being carried, it is illegal.

Mr. Soames: I am sorry to push the Minister. Will he define for us exactly the safety argument in the matter? Will he also say why the exemption cannot be made, when there is a perfectly satisfactory licensing system that works when the police do their job properly? It is plain that the existing system would allow the exemption to be monitored adequately.

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman missed the Second Reading debate, when he should have made that point. We are dealing now with a very specific exclusion—which is what I am trying to address.

Mr. Soames: Answer the question.

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman mutters grumpily, as he has done throughout the debate. If he had mentioned his point on the Second Reading, it might have been worthy of debate. Perhaps he should read the transcript of that debate again.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. We shall not have a debate across the Floor of the Chamber.

5.30 pm

Mr. Howard: On a point of order, Mr. Martin. Is it not highly relevant to an amendment that seeks to exempt from the provisions of the Bill a particular weapon in particular circumstances that questions be raised as to the safety argument for not exempting that weapon? Is that matter not highly germane to the amendment at present under discussion in Committee?

The First Deputy Chairman: Hon. Members can raise any matter in Committee so long as it relates to the amendment. Amendment No. 7 is very narrow, and we cannot have a Second Reading debate on it. Comments must be confined to the amendment before the Committee.

Mr. Soames: Further to that point of order, Mr. Martin. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), my hon. Friends the Members for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) and for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) and I addressed clearly the question of safety within the narrow context of the clause. Is it not intolerable that a junior Minister replying on behalf of the Government should not answer a perfectly sensible question about the safety argument advanced by the Government, which is key to the debate?

The First Deputy Chairman: The amendment does not relate to safety: it deals with another matter entirely. The hon. Gentleman referred to "the clause", but this is not a clause stand part debate. We are debating amendment No. 7.

Mr. Soames: Further to that point of order, Mr. Martin. The proposed clause relates to—

The First Deputy Chairman: Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. We are not debating the clause; we are debating an amendment to the clause.

Mr. Soames: The amendment to the clause framed by my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey clearly states:

"which is incapable of holding more than one cartridge and is not derived from a multi-shot design".

The burden of the debate hinges on safety. Is it not intolerable that the Minister should refuse to answer my question?

The First Deputy Chairman: The Minister may express himself in any way he chooses. If he is out of order, I shall be the first to remind him of that fact.

Mr. Michael: I am very grateful, Mr. Martin. We are hearing some bluster from Opposition Members. The debate is not about safety but about whether there should be exemptions and whether those exemptions would be safe. The point raised by the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) was a matter for the Second Reading debate. The claim of this group of shooters is no better than that made by many other groups who will be disadvantaged by the Bill. We accept that people will be disadvantaged by the legislation—that is an inevitable consequence of passing it into law. We cannot impose a general ban on handguns and then make exceptions that undermine the ban. The fact is that a single-shot pistol is capable of being lethal, portable and easy to conceal. The only difference is that it can be fired a single time, rather than several times, within a short period.

Mr. Frank Cook: The Minister is making a powerful case for consistency. He has referred to that point many times. However, he has not answered the questions that I posed on Monday or Wednesday, or the nine points that I raised with the Home Secretary on Second Reading. I received no answer to other questions that I raised earlier this year. There are many things wrong with firearms legislation in this country. The Government are pleading consistency, but patently ignoring it.

Mr. Michael: I am sorry that my hon. Friend is not satisfied with the answers that he has received. This Bill

is very narrow: it says simply that we will move from banning 80 per cent. of handguns to banning all handguns. That is all the legislation does; it does not address a wide range of issues. Amendment No. 7 tries to reintroduce an exemption for one specific category of handguns: .22 single-shot weapons. My point—I am glad that my hon. Friend believes that I am making it powerfully—is that such an exemption would make nonsense of the Bill. It would treat one group of shooters in a way that is inconsistent with the general approach that is written into the Bill.

I referred to the evidence given to Lord Cullen because several hon. Members mentioned the speed of shooting using a single-shot handgun, which they claimed was one shot per minute. However, evidence to Cullen suggests otherwise. Mr. David Penn, a member of the Firearms Consultative Committee, stated:

"With reasonable practice, a shooter could get the reloading time down to about five seconds. I am content to accept that this could be achieved."

That is the evidence that a firearms expert gave to the Cullen inquiry, and it appears at paragraph 9.52 of the report.

Mr. Soames *rose—*

Mr. Michael: I think that I have had enough of the hon. Gentleman's interventions: they do not contribute much to the debate.

Mr. Soames: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He talks about consistency. If a man is sufficiently skilled to be able to reload a single-shot handgun in five seconds, why does that not apply also to an ordinary single-shot .22 rifle? Where is the consistency in that regard?

Mr. Michael: I do not see the hon. Gentleman's point. We are discussing a Bill that deals entirely with banning handguns. The amendment proposes an exemption in relation to single-shot .22 calibre handguns. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is not used to taking part in general debate in this place since transferring to the other side. We are addressing very specific points about a very specific amendment to a very narrow Bill.

Mr. Peter Atkinson: I thank the Minister for giving way again. The Bill does not ban 100 per cent. of handguns, as it already makes exceptions for trophies of war, black powder weapons and other antique weapons. We are asking that one further category be exempted: the weapons used by Olympic shooters.

Mr. Michael: The exemptions that the hon. Gentleman mentioned were made by the 1997 Act, which is already in place. We seek not to address all gun licensing deficiencies, but to deal with only one element: the exemption of 20 per cent. of handguns allowed by the 1997 Act. That is what this legislation deals with; it is attempting to exempt a narrower group than was exempted by the 1997 Act.

I point out once again that, if we introduce the exemption proposed by amendment No. 7, legally held weapons may still be used illegally. We cited the figures last week: one incident of gun theft—which may involve the theft of several weapons—occurs in England and Wales every day. That may pose a danger to the public. The exemption proposed by amendment No. 7 would undermine the principle embodied in the Act that there should be a complete ban on handguns.

Mr. Chope: Will the hon. Gentleman warn all people contemplating travelling to France for their holidays that they will face a grave risk in so doing as it is possible to purchase a single-shot .22 handgun over the counter in that country?

Mr. Michael: There is a high incidence of accidents involving firearms in France. The point is that we deal with legislation for this country—I thought Opposition Members were generally in favour of that. We are trying to ensure public safety through a total ban on handguns rather than a partial ban, which would be difficult to enforce. However, that is a Second Reading point. We are now considering the narrow proposition that single-shot .22 weapons should be exempt from the ban. I would like to respond in detail to several smaller points raised by hon. Members, but that is the big picture. If we were to accept this amendment, it would undermine the consistency of our legislation, which aims to deal consistently with banning handguns. We believe that the 1997 Act, which is already in place, is defective. The Bill will put matters right. Acceptance of the amendment would undermine the consistency that we are trying to introduce.

Mr. Colvin: With the leave of the Committee, if that is necessary, I shall respond to some of the remarks that have been made during the debate. I am not satisfied with the Minister's summing up and, at the end of my response, I shall press my amendment to a Division.

We heard a powerful speech, as we are accustomed to in this place, from the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook). The hon. Gentleman always speaks robustly on whatever subject is before us. He speaks with immense knowledge of shooting, especially pistol shooting, and he is always sincere. That being so, it is significant that he failed to win any proper answers from the Minister of State. Nor did he receive any satisfactory answers on Second Reading.

I am pleased that so many Conservative Members have been able to participate in the deoate and to have been in their places throughout it, especially as a beauty contest is taking place in Committee Room 10 for the leadership of the Tory party. I was pleased that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) found time to enter the Chamber and join us in the debate. I have no doubt that he will give us his robust support. I hope that that does not mean that he has already been eliminated from the beauty contest. Perhaps the contest is one reason why more hon. Members have not been present. However, Conservative Members have consistently outnumbered Labour Members throughout the afternoon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) made, as one would expect, a powerful response in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), on legislation that might be pending to strengthen control of shotguns. I put the same question to the Minister of State on Second Reading. I asked him then how many draft Bills were in preparation, including those bringing shotguns and air rifles

[Mr. Colvin]

within section 1 certification. I did not receive an answer on Second Reading and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex did not receive one this afternoon.

Mr. Michael: If we followed every rabbit that the hon. Gentleman seeks to set running round the field, we would be denying things left, right and centre. There are no draft Bills.

Mr. Colvin: I am pleased to hear that. That is the response that we could well have heard on Second Reading.

5.45 pm

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) made the important point that neither the Hungerford massacre nor the Dunblane massacre could have taken place if the Bill, as it would be if the amendment were accepted, were enacted. Such a massacre could not be carried out with a single-shot .22. It is wrong to suggest that the public will be endangered if the amendment is incorporated in the Bill.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) made a significant point, which was echoed by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), the shadow Home Secretary. My amendment, as drafted, implies that single-shot .22 pistols could be kept at home, and that is intentional. If the argument is accepted that such pistols pose no danger to the general public because they are specifically constructed match pistols and impractical for use in crime or, indeed, for any other illegal purpose, there is no reason why they should not be kept at home.

If we had sought to exclude .22 pistols from the home and had insisted in the amendment that they should be retained in gun clubs in secure conditions, would the Minister have accepted such an amendment? It is a matter to which he might give further thought between the debates in this place and those in another place that are to follow it.

Mr. Connarty: The amendment refers to single-shot pistols, not specifically designed Olympic single-shot specially crafted pistols. If everyone who now holds a .22 pistol wishes to transfer to ownership of a single-shot .22, 40,000 .22 pistols will still be in circulation. That is the worry. What would happen if someone such as Hamilton were to have two or three single-shot guns? Does the hon. Gentleman not realise that three deaths are just as bad as 16? At the beginning of the day of Dunblane, we were told that only one child had been killed. Does the hon. Gentleman not remember the shock of the nation?

Mr. Colvin: The hon. Gentleman is obviously the Minister of State's messenger boy as his parliamentary private secretary. He has displayed his ignorance of what the sport of shooting is all about. We are talking about single-shot sporting .22s that cannot be adapted for any other purpose.

My hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) made the sort of intervention that would be expected from an hon. Member with a strong constituency interest, in that he has Bisley, the home of the National Rifle Association, in his constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) argued that .22 pistol shooting was the crème de la crème of competition shooting. He expressed the hope that, in accepting the amendment, the Government would save face. We on the Conservative Benches are not normally in the business of suggesting ways in which the Government might save face, but in this instance they have it wrong and we have it right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold asked specifically how many fatalities there have been as a result of crimes involving .22 rimfire handguns. We have not had an answer to that question.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) asked three specific questions. He wanted to know whether the amendment would help, whether it is right and whether it could cause harm. We have not had satisfactory answers.

Mr. Chope: Is my hon. Friend able to surmise why we have not had answers to the pertinent questions to which he has referred, when the Prime Minister has said that he wants there to be maximum public scrutiny of all proposed legislation passing through the House of Commons? Why have Ministers not been prepared to answer pertinent questions?

Mr. Colvin: I thank my hon. Friend—

The First Deputy Chairman: Order. It is best that we do not go too wide of the amendment. It is not for the hon. Gentleman to speculate why an hon. Member expressed himself in a certain way.

Mr. Colvin: I acknowledge your wisdom, Mr. Martin. I shall keep myself strictly to order.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) raised some other interesting issues earlier in the debate. He was told by the Minister of State in an intervention in his speech that the Government were carrying out a review on safety. My hon. Friend had raised the important issue of single-shot .22 handguns. We were told that this is subject to yet another review. One of these days I shall table a question asking just how many reviews the Government have in being and how many civil servants are involved. Setting up a review seems to be the answer to every question on policy.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe, with whom I was in complete agreement—unlike the previous debate in which I took part on this matter, when he was on the Government Benches and I gave him a rather rough ride—made the point that the official Opposition line does not enable them to support the amendment because it enables single-fire .22 pistols to be retained in the home. Would the Minister look again at the provision if an amendment were tabled in another place prohibiting the storage of these pistols in the home and insisting that they are stored in designated, official rifle clubs?

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman is starting to back-track from his amendment because it is deficient in a number of ways. He really should look at the evidence that was given to Lord Cullen by firearms experts about the ease of obtaining guns and extracting them from gun

clubs. It is not as simple as the hon. Gentleman suggests, and he should not hope for further consideration of his amendment.

Mr. Colvin: That displays a certain amount of dictatorial inflexibility on the part of the Government.

Mr. Soames: Can my hon. Friend help me, in view of the woefully inadequate summing up by the Minister of State? Everyone—including the Minister, although he does not understand it—acknowledges the extraordinarily high standards of safety, competence and skill of gun clubs, yet the Minister will not accept the amendment, presumably on the ground of safety. What is it that is so unsafe about this?

Mr. Colvin: The simple answer is that .22 single-shot handguns are remarkably safe. They are probably the safest firearms there are. We have heard from a few hon. Members how dangerous some other firearms, such as shotguns, are. Perhaps an air rifle is one degree safer, but it is very little different from a .22. I think that the Minister has got the message. I very much hope that he will have second thoughts about what is proposed in the amendment and his reluctance to look at the matter between now and when the Bill is considered in another place.

The Government are being very inflexible and dictatorial. They are also displaying ignorance of the sport of competition shooting. It is quite wrong to suggest that an exception for this type of handgun would drive a coach and horses through the Bill. That just is not so. We are in this place to defend the rights of minorities, and that is what Opposition Members have been doing with vigour, with stalwart help from the hon. Member for Stockton, North.

This is yet one more occasion when the proposers and supporters of the amendment have won the argument, and having done so, it is fair that on this occasion we should see whether we can also win the vote. I shall press my amendment to a Division.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 123, Noes 333.

Division No. 29] **[5.53 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baker, Norman
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Cann, Jamie
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Flight, Howard
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(N Essex)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Austin
Nicholls, Patrick
Opik, Lembit
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro & St Austell)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wiltshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and
Mr. Christopher Chope.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard *(Shef'ld Hallam)*
Allen, Graham *(Nottingham N)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Austin, John
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne *(Aberd'n S)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Robert
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Butler, Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain *(Hammersmith & Fulham)*
Colman, Anthony *(Putney)*
Connarty, Michael

Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Ms Clare
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Ms Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Ms Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael John *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Ms Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Ms Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Miss Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Tessa
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony (Manchester C)
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Ms Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Ms Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Ms Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon (Pendle)
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Ms Jacqui (Redditch)
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stott, Roger
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George (NW Norfolk)
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steven
White, Brian
Whitehead, Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Dr Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie (Doncaster C)
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wright, Tony *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Janet Anderson and
Mr. John McFall.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): Clause 1 should not stand part of the Bill, because the Government have not been able to justify it. That was clear from the Minister's inadequate response to the

previous debate. Despite being pressed numerous times, he was unable to give specific safety reasons why single-shot .22 handguns should not be added to the exemptions for certain closely defined categories of firearms holder.

It is legitimate and sensible to permit the 7,000 veterinary officers in this country to handle a handgun safely in certain conditions: not all them work in large animal practices that require a heavier calibre or repeat-shot weapon to dispose of casualty animals humanely. If it is sensible for them to be allowed to use handguns, what specific extra safety danger would be posed by permitting a group of people involved in target shooting competitions or in Olympic sports to fire .22 weapons with single-shot capacity? Largely for that reason, the Opposition will vote against the clause. The Government have also failed to answer the questions posed by the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook).

Make no mistake, if the clause is accepted, Britain will be the only country banned from international pistol shooting competitions. The Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 at least allowed competitors from this country to take part on the international stage in the three .22 calibre events in the Olympic and Commonwealth games.

We have a long, noble and honourable tradition in the sport of pistol shooting, which Britain invented and has dominated for more than 100 years. It is a sporting success story for Britain. In the past 10 years of Commonwealth competition, our competitors have brought home 23 pistol shooting medals in the .22 calibre events alone. As one of the original 12 modern Olympic disciplines, the sport deserves the same recognition as other more visible sports. It should not be lightly destroyed for no practical gain.

Pistol shooting is one of those sports in which everyone—young, old, male, female, able-bodied or disabled—competes on equal terms. They are all valued in the sport. Indeed, pistol shooting offers positive incentives for disabled people, but we shall come to that later, so I shall not stray down that avenue now.

It is legitimate to point out, however, that the British Paraplegic Shooting Association says that shooting is a form of rehabilitation that helps many disabled people with balance and confidence, primarily in the use of a wheelchair and for sport. It provides them with a better quality of life, and encourages them to respect themselves as disabled people in an able-bodied world. If the clause is accepted, disabled people and others will be disqualified from firing pistols in safe conditions.

Whether able-bodied or disabled, pistol shooters are honourable sports people. They cannot be lumped into the same category as the madman of Dunblane. He was granted a gun licence when, according to the Cullen report, the law was not applied as rigorously as Parliament intended when the firearms Acts were passed—I shall leave the hon. Member for Stockton, North to be more specific on that.

The clause bans all sporting pistol shooting. The Opposition would happily go along with that if it provided a sensible gain. If the Government were telling us that there would be a grave danger, a significant loophole and serious risks if we allowed such shooting to continue, every hon. Member would say, "That's it, I agree entirely." No matter how honourable the sport, no matter how long the tradition, no matter the circumstances in which it is conducted, no matter that many disabled people can participate, we would be happy to let the sport be destroyed if the clause added measurable safety precautions to the existing controls, but it does not. The clause is nonsense.

6.15 pm

Rigorous safety controls to protect the public are already provided by the 1997 Act. Let me remind the Committee of those controls. The only pistol that the law still permits under the 1997 Act is a .22 pistol. The pistol is not to be left in secure gun cabinets in people's homes: it must be left only in those gun clubs that can show that they meet strict security criteria, that they satisfy the police that their premises have adequate security, and that appropriate procedures are in place to avoid any unauthorised removal of firearms from the premises.

Under the 1997 Act, pistols have to be held in those strictly limited, highly controlled and regulated circumstances. When the Act was going through, many hon. Members and people outside the House said that those conditions were so restrictive that many clubs would be destroyed, because they would not be able to meet such strict criteria. The previous Government hoped that that would not happen, but strict security controls had to apply to protect the public before shooting could be conducted safely.

Under the 1997 Act, .22 pistols can be moved from a club only if they have to be repaired or if the owner is competing in a national target shooting competition at a different club. Before a gun can be removed from a club, a permit from the police is required, and the gun has to be carried by a third party whom the police are satisfied is a fit and proper person to discharge that responsibility.

Those measures to protect the public are in the existing law. The only excuse that the Government have offered for the clause is that it is consistent with the 1997 Act. That argument is nonsense. Of course one hopes that, somewhere along the line, legislation is consistent with existing law, but that is not a good enough reason for abolishing a sport and for abolishing .22 shooting, when, to use the phrase that the Minister used earlier, there would be no practical safety gain.

When pressed further, the Minister said that, when the Government talk about maximum safety, what they really mean is maximum practical safety. That is a considerable explanation—I was going to say "loophole"—and the Minister has perhaps given a considerable hostage to fortune.

I agree with the Minister that we should ensure maximum practical safety, but it adds not one iota of practical safety to go further than the rigorous controls in the 1997 Act—which permits .22 shooting only at gun clubs in strict conditions—and to abolish the sport altogether.

The clause has a practical effect. We take the Home Secretary at his word, because he is an honourable man. He intends to use section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968 to exempt foreign competitors who come to this country to participate in the Commonwealth games or for the Olympic games if we win the chance to hold them here in the future. I know that that can be done. Special certificates will be issued under section 5 to allow those competitors to shoot here.

[Mr. David Maclean]

There will be competitors from 50 to 60 countries, because shooting is one of the most important sports in those countries that were pressing Manchester to include shooting in its Commonwealth games application. No doubt arrangements can be put in place for those competitors, and we may later press the Government about them. It will be difficult, and much time will be spent by people at Queen Anne's gate and among police forces working it out, but arrangements can be put in place to allow such people to shoot in this country.

What nonsense. No doubt the media will wish to cover shooting events at the next Commonwealth games, and will find interesting the spectacle of people from other countries coming with weapons and firing them in strictly controlled conditions. They will fire those guns safely at sporting events, and the only people not able to take part will be potential British competitors in their own country, because clause 1 forbids it.

That is the nonsense that the Government advocate on the ground of consistency with the 1997 Act. It is not consistent, because that Act allows some exceptions. We have heard about the black powder case, and about the exception for veterinary officers who use weapons to kill injured animals humanely.

We suggested in an earlier debate that an exception on single-shot weapons could have been added. We lost that argument, and we naturally accept the overwhelming majority against us. Although we lost the vote, I do not think that my hon. Friends and I lost the argument, because the Government did not have a legitimate answer.

I should like to share with the Committee a letter from the British Olympic Association, which I think all hon. Members have received. The letter states:

"Whilst the British Olympic Association welcomes tighter firearms control which will ensure that tragedies such as Hungerford and Dunblane are never repeated we are concerned about the impact that the proposed legislation will have on competitive pistol shooting in this country.

The legislation, as it stands, will effectively preclude representation by British athletes at future Olympic Games in the three Olympic shooting disciplines concerned. With 135 national federations competing for 20-30 places in each discipline there is a significant level of training and commitment necessary to achieve an Olympic quota place. Forcing competitive pistol shooting abroad will kill the sport and with it the necessary depth to ensure international representation at the highest level.

We therefore strongly support any reasonable amendments which will allow competitive pistol shooting in the Olympic discipline to continue."

I may wish to refer to that letter when we debate the new clauses. I mention it now because the Government have been quite dictatorial in driving through their opposition to amendment No. 7, which was perfectly reasonable, and they can easily win all the votes.

If the Government will not pay attention to the British Olympic Association, the British Shooting Sports Council, and the many honest sportsmen and sportswomen, some of whom have been or may still be police officers or who have served in the military, and who have handled handguns perfectly safely over the years and are members of shooting teams, I urge them at least to listen to Back Benchers such as the hon. Member for Stockton, North, who spoke with considerable authority on the subject.

If the Government see a chance of introducing even more tightly controlled conditions than those in the 1997 Act to permit sporting shooting in some form or other to survive, why will they not co-operate with us on that? If the single-shot amendment was flawed, or if, in the Government's view, it is too dangerous, is there nothing at all that they would be tempted to accept in the new clauses that would permit, under extraordinarily tight conditions—perhaps in one centre in the country—sporting shooting of some description to continue?

If it is the Government's view that it is wrong per se to allow such shooting to continue, they should say so. It is perfectly legitimate for them to say, "We do not want such shooting to take place at all. We do not want anyone who does not wear Her Majesty's uniform to fire a pistol under any conditions." If that is the Government's view, they should not hide behind a bogus safety argument that they have not made out to justify clause 1. Nor should they hide behind the argument of consistency, because their response to the debate on amendment No. 7 was clearly inconsistent with the exceptions in the 1997 Act.

If the Government say, "We want to reduce the number of people handling guns because of the gun culture," let them tackle television and the influence of films that promote the gun culture. They should not tackle the Commonwealth games team and the British Olympic team, and those who legitimately handle firearms safely in gun clubs.

There is a tremendous obligation on the Government to explain why they are determined to shoot down, if I may use that phrase, any amendment that would permit shooting in any circumstances. By their actions, they seem to be saying, "We have taken a decision on principle. All guns will be banned, and we do not care what arguments you or anyone else present, whether on safety, sporting, Olympic or disablement grounds. That is our argument in principle, and we are not bending from it." If that is their view, let them say so.

Unless the Government give some hope that it will be possible to protect in some narrow way the glorious tradition of .22 British pistol shooting at sporting events such as the Olympic games, the Opposition will have no option but to vote against clause 1 standing part of the Bill.

Mr. Michael: I shall be brief, because I do not want to go over the ground that was covered on Second Reading. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I explained the case for the Bill in Wednesday's debate. That case was clearly made, and it commanded the overwhelming support of hon. Members.

I do not intend to enter into debate about the Commonwealth or Olympic games, because new clauses deal with those issues. In his opening speech, the Home Secretary accepted and set out the Bill's impact, and he was congratulated by hon. Members on both sides of the Committee on being open and honest about that rather than trying to hide it. Our stall and the reasons for the Bill have been clearly set out.

Clause 1 contains the Bill's key element, and that is why it must stand part of the Bill. That key element is the prohibition of small-calibre pistols, which was accepted so overwhelmingly on Second Reading. The clause extends to small-calibre pistols the ban that was instituted

by the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997. That Act prohibited 80 per cent. of handguns from general civilian ownership, and clause 1 prohibits the remainder.

The points in the speech by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) were made by some of his hon. Friends when he was the Minister responsible for these matters. He was not convinced then, and I am not convinced now. I assure the right hon. Gentleman and the Committee that we did not introduce a measure which we know will affect the sport of shooting lightly or without thought.

As I said earlier, in our original evidence to Lord Cullen, we said that we would look at the possibility of protecting the sporting use of handguns, although we felt that there was a strong case for a general ban. Our conclusion, which was thoughtful and reasoned, was that a complete ban was the right way forward. In opposition, we supported the 1997 Act, because we saw it as a vast improvement on earlier law. However, we also said, and have always said, that we did not think that it went far enough.

I am glad that the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border accepts the principle that public safety should override the interests of sport. We think that a total ban on handguns will help public safety, but from his speech it is clear that the right hon. Gentleman does not. It is a matter of judgment, but I am glad that, unlike some of his hon. Friends, the right hon. Gentleman accepts the principle on which we have based the legislation. We believe that it will have the practical effect of increasing public safety, and, as I have said, we did not come to that conclusion without careful thought. We did not believe that the 1997 Act went far enough, or that the pistol clubs system proposed under the Act would guarantee the public's safety. The only way in which to do that is to remove the weapons from general circulation.

The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border cannot have it both ways. He says that we are not willing to listen and to allow exceptions, and then refers to the fact that we have indeed allowed and supported exceptions for veterinary purposes and for dealing with large mammals. Those are public interest exceptions rather than pure sporting exceptions, so we have been consistent, and have driven for the best possible outcome in legislation for the public's protection.

As I have said, the only way in which to achieve maximum public safety is to remove handguns from general circulation. That is the effect of the clause, and I hope that it can now stand part of the Bill.

6.30 pm

Mr. Soames: In the spirit of the speech made by the Minister of State, I shall not delay the House long.

I support my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean). For many reasons, clause 1 should not stand part of the Bill. There is no sensible, pragmatic reason why the amendment of my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) should not have been accepted. The safety arguments were not answered properly. The consistency case has been lamentably badly made. It has not in any way altered the balance of feelings of any Conservative Member who opposes the clause.

The other extraordinary thing is the Home Secretary's remarkably high-handed, arrogant and cheeky response to the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), who knows a lot about all this, and whose views on this matter are fortified and sustained by a considerable knowledge of sporting shooting. It is a pity that his views have not been more carefully listened to.

One of the purposes of the House is to safeguard faithfully the interests of minorities. It is unfortunate that, among other things, the Olympians, who have in such a distinguished manner represented this country for so long, will no longer be able to do so. That is a sad and unhappy state of affairs, which the House should not countenance or allow to happen.

Mr. Frank Cook: I do not know whether I shall delay the Committee uselessly this evening. Certainly, it is not my intention, but the simple truth is that I have raised numerous questions and made many points of logic, and none of them has received a sensible response. The only point that has been made in response to the case that I make, which I hope is based on common sense, is that I have been against the legislation from the outset and that I have been a passionate advocate, but that I am wrong anyway. That is not the way in which to counter logic.

I was against the previous legislation that was introduced by the Conservative regime and, as Opposition Whip on the Hungerford Bill, I was against aspects of that legislation. Incidentally, that was the first time that a Government lost their sittings motion. I am pleased to see the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), who was a Minister at the time, sitting on the Opposition Front Bench. I am proud to say that I was responsible for the then Government losing the motion. I suppose that that is one way in which to get into "Erskine May". I was happy to do it.

That is a measure of the honesty that I have applied, or sought to apply, to proposals such as this all along, because all long they have been inadequate. Clause 1 is equally inadequate, because it does not recognise the simple truths of the matter. The whole morass of firearms legislation is full of anachronisms and anomalies. Clause 1 is symptomatic of that and one example of those anomalies.

What do we have in terms of facts? We know that Thomas Watt Hamilton acquired his original handgun illegally; that is a proven fact, provable with documentation. We know that his certification was inappropriate because the police did not check the false statements that he made; that is also a proven fact and checkable. We know that he was rejected by and indeed ejected from some of the gun clubs that he sought to join. We know that he engaged in illegal gun purchases and trading and that he threatened a lady with a loaded weapon through the open window of his stationary vehicle.

If that does not constitute grounds for the removal of all certificates and of all weapons, and indeed the throwing into custody of an individual, frankly, I do not know what the law means. The police had all those opportunities and, despite Sergeant Hughes pleading with his senior officers to take that course of action, a senior officer in the shape of a deputy chief constable refused to take action on the ground that he was afraid to go to a court of law on appeal. If they were as indolent and as dilatory in that instance, how do we know that they will be any more conscientious in the light of the Bill?

I have outlined the case in relation to Thomas Watt Hamilton. There is a similar history in the case of Michael Ryan and Hungerford. He, too, did not have lawfully held

[Mr. Frank Cook]

weapons, as those weapons are frequently described by both Downing street and the Home Office. Frankly, I do not know whether I do any good by raising those points, which I have raised so many times before. The Bill is based on a false premise. We are taking punitive action against people who are law-abiding, who have conformed in every respect to this country's legal requirements, as laid down by the House, and we intend to punish them and indeed to make them pay a considerable sum; no one will convince me that the draft compensation scheme is adequate to provide for the stocks that people hold, certainly the dealers. Therefore, there seems to be a deeply entrenched determination to expunge the sport of pistol and revolver target shooting from people's leisure opportunities, regardless of whether they be young or old, black or white, able or disabled.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is a supporter of Blackburn Rovers, who I am told have been known on occasion to play football. He will have attended those meetings and will have seen at the front, by the pitch side, disabled people watching the game, which I hope was entertaining—although it rarely was when Blackburn Rovers came to Middlesbrough. I wonder whether he has thought about whether the people sitting in those wheelchairs, or people with prostheses or arthritic callipers, take part in target shooting for the sake of a sense of sporting achievement, because many of them do. It might not have gained the attention of the Home Secretary on those occasions—*[Interruption.]*—and it certainly is not getting his attention today. Those people, whether they support Blackburn Rovers, any other football team or, indeed, any other sport, can, in the sport of target shooting, actively engage in the activity and compete on equal terms. We shall stop that if we go ahead with the Bill.

I want to put a question to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. Is it his intention to do away with the sport altogether? If the answer is yes, and I fully expect it to be so, what will he do about policemen who are part of an armed team? I have news for the Home Secretary, as I had news for the previous incumbent of that post: any police officer undertaking firearms duty has an opportunity to use a shooting range, but the time on that range is limited. He has the opportunity to make several shots from a service weapon, but the number of rounds is limited. He has to stand square on at the range and shoot at a piece of cardboard, but that discipline is limited. To expect a policeman to go on active service with limited training time, limited experience loosing off rounds and with limited positional disciplines puts that officer at risk.

When I raised the matter previously, although perhaps not as comprehensively as I am doing today, the Home Secretary of the day said that police training was adequate. That is not so, but I would have great difficulty persuading a policeman to say so publicly. Why is that? It is because of questions of career development, of protection of pension rights and, sadly, because we live in a society in which the whistleblower virtually puts himself as the bull on the target at 25 m range, and has just as much chance of survival. It is indicative of the sort of nonsense surrounding the issue.

Many steps should be taken to make more stringent the legislation that applies to firearms of every sort, not just pistols and revolvers, but the Government are ignoring the anomalies. They are turning a blind eye, yet at the same time they are pretending to be consistent and logical. Frankly, they are neither.

This evening will not exhaust my will and my wish to continue preaching common sense, because I believe that legislation should be based on common sense and be practicable and enforceable. However, I can give my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary some comfort, because I regret that after this evening's proceedings I shall not be able to continue with my arguments because of parliamentary duties elsewhere. I want to be sure that my arguments are clearly understood tonight. All reasonable proposals, for which my right hon. Friend pleaded, have been ignored without any response or justification—*[Interruption.]*—indeed, they are being ignored at this very minute.

Mr. Colvin: I support the view of my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) that clause 1 should not stand part. The Minister referred to clause 1 as the key element in the Bill, as it bans all .22 weapons. During the earlier debate on my amendment No. 7, which failed, the hon. Gentleman said that it was not the Government's business—and, indeed, it would be quite wrong—to talk about exemptions. However, as he admitted, there are already exemptions and exclusions. For example, he said that vets would be allowed to retain handguns. I would add the starters for athletic and swimming races. Slaughterhouse men are also entitled to retain handguns—.38 revolvers, which are much more dangerous than single-shot .22s used for competition purposes. There is also the question of black powder pistols. Exemptions and exclusions are already permitted and I see absolutely no reason to accept the Minister's argument against my amendment No. 7—that it would mean special exemptions. They exist in previous legislation and they exist in the Bill.

6.45 pm

There has been some discussion about the dangers of shooters going underground. Accepting amendment No. 7 or rejecting this clause would reduce that risk. If shooting with .22s is prohibited, there is a danger that some shooting might go underground. Of course, as other hon. Members have said, it is unlikely that any of the law-abiding community of sportsmen or women would go down that path.

I agree with the Minister on one matter—that the Conservative Members who have spoken today are generally opposed to the Bill. We have been doing our level best to try to salvage a sport at which Britain excels and which poses no security risk to the public. The Minister's arguments about safety were inadequate. As the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) said, it defies all logic.

Perhaps we should draw a comparison between .22 shooting and archery. I happen to be an honorary member of the Romsey Archers. I know that someone with a bow and arrow can fire more accurate shots, over a longer range, at greater speed and with a more lethal effect than could ever be the case with a .22 single-shot pistol. I am not trying to make a case for banning archery—*[Interruption.]* Obviously, the Minister does not understand the logic of my case. I am pointing out the illogicality of the Bill.

My amendment was a narrow one and the Bill is also narrow, but nothing is as narrow as the minds of the Minister and of the Government in what they are trying to do in the Bill. That is why I have no hesitation in supporting my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border in asking the Committee to reject clause 1.

Mr. Garnier: I shall be brief, as many hon. Members want to speak. I remind the Government of the two central questions that I asked during the debate on the amendment. First, is the Bill right, and secondly, will it achieve what it is intended to achieve? The answer to both questions is no.

I also remind the Government that they are destroying an innocent pastime and I ask them to think about the sort of people who engage in it. They are nothing other than respectable, law-abiding citizens and their sport brings this country great credit. The Government are also removing from the disabled an opportunity for enjoyment and competition. I invite the Home Secretary, the Minister of State and even the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien)—with whom I shared a happy time on the armed forces parliamentary scheme—to come to the gun club in my constituency and persuade those in wheelchairs who compete at pistol shooting that it is for the benefit of the public that they should have their pistols and their opportunity for enjoyment taken away from them.

The Bill tackles the horrors of Dunblane and Hungerford by asking the wrong questions. Guns, whether automatic or multi-shot pistols, are obtainable on the black market throughout the country. We could go to any number of inner-city pubs and buy a pistol, be it single-shot or multi-shot, on the black market.

If the Government want to do something useful, they should increase the police resources dedicated to tackling the problem of unlawfully purchased or stolen weapons. As the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) suggested, Ministers could also increase resources dedicated to allowing police to fire more often and for longer periods within police time.

The Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997—which I did not vote for—went too far. This Bill and clause 1 go further, and to no good effect. I invite my hon. Friends to reject clause 1.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: In the debate on clause 1 stand part, it is appropriate to focus again on the key issue and to try to persuade Ministers—as persuasion is the only weapon that we have—to give some thought to our arguments. I realise that I shall perhaps again make some points that I have already made, in the debate on amendment No. 7.

I apologise that I could not be in the Chamber to hear the Minister's reply to the debate on amendment No. 7, but I have been told that he did not give any ground—although he said something to the effect that the Government would consider conducting some type of review. If such a review means that the Government might seriously reconsider their position before the Bill goes to another place—I should be grateful to have the Minister of State's ear on this point—and offer a possibility of modifying the Bill, it will have been a proper exercise of legislative function.

The case made by Conservative Members is that the only ground for passing such a stringent Bill is that the public interest and public safety require doing so, and that the passage of such a Bill is necessary only if the single-shot pistol—which cannot be adapted and must be reloaded individually between shots—is seriously likely to be used in massacres such as Hungerford or Dunblane, which rightly horrified the House and the public. However, I have not heard either the Home Secretary or the Minister of State make that specific argument. I have also not heard them say that there is a real danger that someone who was minded to carry out such a massacre—who would be an oddball, and a dangerous loner—would attempt to use a single-shot .22 pistol.

Hon. Members know that it is only too easy to obtain other types of handguns, and we stand four-square with the Government in passing proper measures to prevent the illegal holding of any type of handgun. Conservative Members believe, however, that we have made a serious argument that the type of specialised sporting weapon used for the Olympic games, for the Commonwealth games and for other bona fide sporting activities represents no real threat of causing that type of massacre.

Mr. Michael: Amendment No. 7 was not as narrow as the point that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is making. We are now debating clause stand part, and the Bill in its generality.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am grateful to the Minister of State for his comment, which I take not so much as a rebuke as an invitation to think that Ministers may still have an open mind on the matter. I think that I am right in believing that a clause stand part debate is exactly the moment at which to attempt to put some slightly wider ideas into the minds of Ministers, so that, before they force through the clause, they may either reflect further on those ideas or have the chance to indicate that there will be an opportunity—perhaps at a later stage in the Bill's passage, such as Report or in another place—to make sensible and perhaps tightly focused amendments.

Mr. Peter Atkinson: I am sorry to disappoint my right hon. and learned Friend, but I suspect that the review mentioned by the Minister of State will be an attempt to make the law even tougher. The Minister was concerned that black powder replica pistols, for example, might be used in a massacre similar to Dunblane. He said that Ministers were sufficiently concerned—in such an idiotic way—about such weapons that they might apply the ban to them.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am sorry to hear my hon. Friend's comments, and I can hope only that they are incorrect.

Mr. Michael: The hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) did not listen to what I said. I said that the exemption introduced in another place to the 1997 Act had caused considerable concern to the police.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Such a matter can be fairly considered in a review. However, I am inviting the Minister to consider carefully focused amendments to the Bill, which will allow legitimate sporting activities to continue in tightly controlled circumstances, so that British citizens who are held to be responsible can train for and compete in the Commonwealth and Olympic games.

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

Such people will be few in number, because the sport is comparatively focused and involves a comparatively small number of highly responsible people. Moreover—as I have already made perfectly clear—they will be members of clubs. I suggest that they should keep their weapons at their clubs, as that would provide as much safety as any hon. Member could reasonably propose. I say that with all the more force—at the risk of boring the Committee—because, as we know, a person can go across the channel, buy a single-shot .22 weapon without any licensing requirement, bring it back to the UK in the glove box of his car and know that no one is remotely likely to stop him. It would require tight intelligence—of a type that there is no reason to believe there is or should be—to prevent such activities.

We are dealing with massacres committed by people who are unbalanced, criminally minded and extremely devious. Such people are likely—because they have done so in the past—to get hold of far more dangerous weapons, and they have evaded an already complex licensing system. Conservative Members are simply asking for tightly focused exemptions so that honest people can participate in an honest sporting activity that is of real importance to the United Kingdom and to sport. I ask the Home Secretary and the Home Office to think again.

Mr. Boswell: I invite the Home Secretary to think again. The passage of clause 1 will represent a step change in legislation, and the sport of pistol shooting, rather than being confined, will effectively be eliminated. It will be a change in quality and character and not simply in numbers, and it will entail all the consequences mentioned by my hon. Friends and other hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook).

Simultaneously, in introducing a blanket and indiscriminate ban, Ministers are forcing themselves to be discriminatory. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) said, the Government cannot control what happens outside the United Kingdom, because the Bill is confined to Great Britain. Not even the Government, with their majority, can control what happens outside the UK, and the consequences will be remarkable.

The first consequence will affect Olympic and other competitions, about which we shall hear more later in the debate. Ministers will have to enforce exceptions in the system—although I am pleased that even limited exceptions are being considered—to enable activities that are regarded as perfectly acceptable and normal abroad to be pursued in the UK. The question remains, however—the Home Secretary has not clarified the matter—whether such exceptions will include the participation of British shooters alongside their continental counterparts, or whether British shooters will be uniquely discriminated against, in a manner that may well attract the attention of the European Court of Human Rights.

We shall require further clarification also on the issue of police certification for persons entering the UK, who are participating in shooting competitions. I raise that matter only to emphasise the difficulties that will require further thought.

Another matter must be considered. There is an issue not only of importation of illegal firearms—which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire mentioned—but of discrimination in regard to the type of people who will be able to continue shooting. Someone who lives in Kent near the channel ports or who happens to be affluent can carry on shooting as much as he likes, because he can go to France or anywhere else where that activity is perfectly legitimate. It will be members of ordinary pistol clubs—probably those from less affluent backgrounds—who will be precluded. There will thus be a weird social inversion as an unintended but very real consequence of the Government's misguided policies.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I shall be brief. On Second Reading, I said that the Bill was small-minded, mean and profoundly bad, and clause 1 encapsulates that fact. Also on Second Reading, the Home Secretary said that the Bill was designed to protect the public, but can anyone really believe that small-calibre pistols—

It being Seven o'clock, and there being private business set down by direction of THE CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS *under Standing Order No. 20 (Time for taking private business), further proceedings stood postponed.*

Private Bills (Procedure)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That—

(1) the Promoters of every Private Bill which originated in this House or was brought from the House of Lords in the last Parliament shall have leave to proceed with that Bill, if they think fit, in the present Session;

(2) every such Bill which originated in this House shall be presented to the House not later than the fifth day on which the House sits after this day;

(3) there shall be deposited with every Bill so presented a declaration signed by the Agent for the Bill, stating that the Bill is the same, in every respect, as the Bill at the last stage of its proceedings in this House in the last Parliament;

(4) every Bill so presented shall be laid by one of the Clerks in the Private Bill Office on the Table of the House on the next meeting of the House after the day on which the Bill was presented;

(5) every Bill so laid on the Table shall be deemed to have been read the first time and (if the Bill had been read a second time in the last Parliament) to have been read a second time and—

(i) if such Bill had been referred to the Committee on Unopposed Bills in the last Parliament, it shall stand so referred;

(ii) if such Bill had been referred to a Committee during the last Parliament and not reported by that Committee to the House, the Bill shall stand committed and—

(a) all Petitions against the Bill which stood referred to the Committee on the Bill shall stand referred to the Committee on the Bill in the present Session, subject to the determination of any outstanding objection to the locus standi of any petitioner; and

(b) any minutes of evidence taken before the Committee on the Bill shall stand referred to the Committee on the Bill in the present Session;

(iii) if such Bill had been reported by any Committee, it shall be ordered to be read the third time unless it had been reported with Amendments in the last Parliament and had not been considered as so amended, in which case it shall be ordered to lie upon the Table;

(iv) if such Bill had been read the third time in the last Parliament, it shall be deemed to have been read the third time;

(6) paragraph (2) of Standing Order 166 relating to Private Business (First reading) shall not apply to any Bill brought from the House of Lords in the present Session and to which this Order relates;

(7) when any Bill which was brought from the House of Lords in the last Parliament and to which this Order relates is brought from the House of Lords in the present Session, the Agent for the Bill shall deposit in the Private Bill Office a declaration, signed by him, stating that the Bill is the same, in every respect, as the Bill which was brought from the House of Lords in the last Parliament and, as soon as a certificate by one of the Clerks in the Private Bill Office that such a declaration has been so deposited has been laid upon the Table of the House—

(i) unless the Examiner had reported pursuant to Standing Order 74 relating to Private Business (Examination of bills brought from the House of Lords, etc.), the Bill shall stand referred to the Examiners;

(ii) if the Examiner had so reported, the Bill shall be ordered to be read a second time, or, if it had been read a second time, it shall be read a second time and committed; but

(iii) if the Bill had been reported by a Committee with Amendments in the last Parliament it shall be committed to the Chairman of Ways and Means who shall make only such Amendments to the Bill as had been made thereto by the Committee in the last Parliament, and shall report the Bill to the House forthwith, and the Bill shall be ordered to lie upon the Table;

(8) any Bill which under the provisions of this Order is deemed to have been read the first time, or the first and second time, or the first, second and third time, shall be recorded in the Journal of the House as having been so read;

(9) without prejudice to the provisions of paragraph (5) of this Order, only those Petitions against any Bill which stood referred to the Committee on the Bill and which had not been withdrawn or had been deposited pursuant to paragraph (b) of Standing Order 126 relating to Private Business (Reference to committee of petitions against bill) shall stand referred to the Committee on the same Bill in the present Session;

(10) in relation to any Bill to which this Order applies Standing Order 127 relating to Private Business (Right of audience before committees on opposed bills) shall have effect as if the words "under Standing Order 126 (Reference to committee of petitions against bill)" were omitted;

(11) where any Standing Order had been dispensed with in respect of any private Bill in the last Parliament, those Standing Orders shall be deemed to have been ordered to be dispensed with in respect of any such Bill presented or brought from the Lords in pursuance of this Order;

(12) any Standing Orders complied with in respect of any Bill originating in the House of Lords to which this Order relates shall be deemed to have been complied with in respect of such Bill if the same is brought from the House of Lords in the present Session, and any notices published or given and any deposits made in respect of such Bill in the last Parliament shall be held to have been published, given and made, respectively, for the Bill so brought from the House of Lords in the present Session;

(13) no further fees shall be charged in respect of proceedings on a Bill in respect of which fees have been incurred in the last Parliament.—*[The Chairman of Ways and Means.]*

7 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): The purpose of the motion is to enable the private Bills that were before the House at the end of the last Parliament, or that originated here in the last Session of that Parliament before going to another place, to be revived and taken automatically through the stages that they had passed in this House. As a result, the Bills will be in exactly the same position as they would have been if the previous Session had not been brought to an end as a result of the general election.

When a Session of Parliament is brought to an end by a Dissolution, it is the practice of the House to enable those private Bills that were before it to resume their passage in the new Parliament, although I have read the thoroughly learned speech on the history of those matters by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett), who I see in his place, on 27 October 1982. I am indebted to him for the history that he set out.

The promoters of a private Bill and, where relevant, any petitioners concerned about the Bill or any aspects of it, are entitled to expect Parliament to consider that Bill individually and to reach a decision on the merits of each case. The revival motion will enable that process to be completed in the case of the six private Bills to which it applies.

Some of the Bills affected by this motion—for example, the King's College London Bill, which emanates from my constituency—have been the subject of careful consideration, both of the promoters' and petitioners' cases. Others, including the Imperial College Bill, with which I am also concerned, contain proposals which, though important, are uncontroversial. In both sets of cases, however, it would be unfair and quite unreasonable to refuse to pass the motion, thereby killing all the Bills

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en masse, without any consideration of their respective merits. Having already incurred significant expense in promoting their Bills, promoters would have to start once more from scratch. That would be unfair not only to promoters but to petitioners who would have to present their cases all over again.

I have already adduced, in the last Parliament, the reasons why it is important that the King's College London Bill should be passed. The Imperial College Bill is an important piece of draft legislation, which affects not only my constituency but, like the King's College London Bill, the future of medical education in London. The Bill would provide for the Royal postgraduate medical school and the Charing Cross and Westminster medical school to be united with Imperial college, thereby establishing what we expect will become a world-class teaching and research facility, both complementing and benefiting from the world-class science teaching and research already carried out at Imperial college. The Bill is not party political or controversial. It passed all its stages in the House unopposed between January and March this year. When Parliament was dissolved, it was awaiting a Reading in another place.

There is considerable urgency in the case of the Imperial College Bill because the merger is due to take place on 1 August this year. Any delay in meeting that target will involve the college in considerable expense which, like all such public bodies, it can ill afford. I have spoken before of the need for the King's College London Bill.

I am aware that hon. Members have delayed the passing of the motion and caused it to be debated tonight because they are concerned about particular private Bills. It would, however, be quite wrong to refuse to pass the motion for those reasons. As I said, each private Bill should be individually scrutinised by the House and should pass or fail on its merits. That is what promoters and petitioners are entitled to expect. It is a practice which the House has long followed and it is why you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in your capacity as Chairman of Ways and Means, have seen fit to table the motion which I commend to the House.

7.4 pm

Mr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): I agree with the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) and support the revival motion. I support it in order to breathe life into the Bill of which I am now the sponsor—the Southampton International Boat Show Bill. That Bill is about as uncontroversial as a Bill could be. Indeed, in the last Session, it passed all its Commons stages, received a Second Reading in another place in March 1997 and was awaiting an Unopposed Bill Committee when the Session ended.

The aim of the Bill is to amend the facility for the closure of the Mayflower park in Southampton each autumn as originally set out in the Hampshire Act 1983. The park is next to the waterfront and that is, of course, an integral part of the Southampton international boat show, which is now Europe's largest show involving more than 500 exhibitors, 120,000 attenders and more than £40 million of business transacted during the show itself.

The closure of a public park for more than six days requires permission by way of a private Bill. The Hampshire Act 1983 gives permission only for nine days' closure. The variation between the closure to provide for public access to the show and park closure for the preparation and dismantling of the exhibition is therefore sought in order to allow an extra day of public showing.

The boat show is very much a part of Southampton. It is welcomed by the city's population, but its international reputation means that it receives visitors from across the world and provides an unrivalled showcase for the UK boat building industry, securing many export orders for that element of the nation's industry. It is therefore very important for the UK as a whole, not just for Southampton or the surrounding region.

The Bill, however, provides not an alteration in the overall numbers of days that the park is closed or partly closed but a variation in the days that it is open to the public to cater for the changing patterns of attendance at exhibitions of this type. The Bill will allow the show to open to the public over two full weekends—two Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

The 10-day opening envisaged in the Bill is now typical of the Southampton international boat show's competitors. Increasingly, visitors wish to extend their visits to such shows over more than one day and book hotels in the vicinity to that end. The provision of two full weekends therefore allows for the maximisation of the facility and brings the boat show into line with its overseas competitors. That is especially important for international visitors seeking to place orders for boats. Indeed, some sections of the UK boat industry, especially the power boat industry, export up to 90 per cent. of their production to overseas visitors.

As I said, the variation will in no way adversely affect the public's general right of access to the park since improvements in efficiency in the setting up and dismantling of the exhibition will mean that the additional day's public opening can be compensated for by less time spent on those activities.

Last year, the UK boating industry's turnover topped £1.75 billion. Overall, it represents a favourable balance of trade to the UK of £291 million a year. It is fair to say that it is a great success story for our country. The Southampton international boat show also provides an unrivalled opportunity for the business to show off its wares and for the public to get a taste of what is on offer and, in many instances, to place orders for the boats on display. I hope, therefore, that the House will find it possible to support that showcase and assist that public success story. By reviving the Bill and allowing it to continue and complete its passage through its various stages, the House will be assisting British industry in a positive manner.

7.9 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The motion before the House appears straightforward, but it is actually one of the more arcane and esoteric segments of the House's business. I notice in passing that we are debating this subject at the same time as the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons is meeting in Committee Room 20. In addition, the Tory party is having its hustings tonight—

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): Been there, done that.

Mr. Hughes: Some of us are spared having to attend that particular meeting.

I have a few things to say about the procedure and then about the Bills themselves. I own up to being one of those who has, by blocking the motion, forced this debate and I think it right that we should have this debate. I shall support the passage of the motion—my objective in forcing in the debate was to have the debate, not to block the motion. Therefore, like the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), I hope that, at the end of the debate, the House will vote for the motion and allow the Bills to go through.

A few years ago, the private business of the House reduced considerably after both an inquiry into private business and the changes that, by and large, took transport and works business out of the private Bill procedure. Private business remains a difficult area for the public to get to grips with and understand and I want therefore to comment on how we as the House of Commons might do more to make sure that it is not a hidden corner of legislation. To be honest, the electorate rarely get to know about it or participate in the process.

Private business is, by definition, business that does not affect the whole country, but affects only a specific area or institution. I hope that, as Parliament devolves powers to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and, in time, to London and the other regions of England, we shall get rid of this sort of business from this place. There may be a national interest in the Bills—as the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Mr. Whitehead) said, there is a Southampton interest, a south coast interest and a national interest relating to the Southampton International Boat Show Bill—but the reality is that whether the boat show is open for nine or 10 days is very much a Southampton issue and it is better debated by those with a local knowledge and interest, rather than in this place. The same is true of the other Bills that are affected—and, in a sense, hidden—by the motion. If we are contemplating taking democracy out to the people, as the Prime Minister did on Friday, I hope that, by the end of this Parliament, private business will have gone out to the people as well.

My second point is that we must get away from the nonsense of never knowing whether private business is going to come up. It can, in theory, come up on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday, but never on a Friday, for some reason that I have never looked into.

Mr. Maclean: There is nobody here.

Mr. Hughes: There will be lots of people here on a Friday to debate fox hunting, so I am sure they could come for other private business.

It is a nonsense that, on a Thursday when the business statement is made, all that the Leader of the House says is, "The Chairman of Ways and Means may set down private business to be considered next Monday," without telling us what that business is, without it ever getting into the public record and, potentially, without anybody apart from those in the know knowing about it more than four days in advance.

Let us take two of the examples relevant to the motion: the Bills relevant to the south-west and Cornwall—I see the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) is present—the Tamar Bridge Bill and the Bodmin Moor Commons Bill. Those are both important pieces of legislation, especially in Cornwall, but it seems to me that, if they were to have come up in tonight's slot, it would have been helpful for some sort of public notification to have been given to the people of Cornwall, and not only to the promoters, who clearly have an interest, and to those in the know.

We must get away from a procedure that is nobody's fault, but that means that private Bills are an activity that is carried on between consenting adults in private and only occasionally emerges at the last minute into the public domain. The Clerks are extremely helpful and I make no criticism of them, but a sort of loop that means that one does not know when or how to petition means that the great British public might be shut out. I hope we can, as the House, make private legislation much more accessible to the public.

The Library fact sheet states:

> "Private Legislation is a very complex subject, and the idea of these notes is no more than to provide an introduction for the layman."

I checked with the Clerk and discovered that "Erskine May", which is in the process of being updated from its 1989 edition, has pages and pages on the subject of private Bills and all the things that one can do with them and how one can object to them.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, had he been in the House 100 years ago, he would have spent more time on private Bills than on public ones?

Mr. Hughes: Indeed, I am aware that the business of the House used to consist almost wholly of private Bills—the building of the railways meant that little else came to Parliament for years and years. I am glad that we have moved to a system of local inquiry, although I have some reservations about the powers of the Secretaries of State under the Transport and Works Act 1992 and believe that the balance may have been moved the wrong way.

I am keen that, as part of the modernisation process of this Parliament, we look for ways to make timetabling, fixing of dates and notification in advance of the proceedings of private Bills far more accessible to the public. The Leader of the House is not in her place, but I hope that, even in the next few weeks, we arrive at a system whereby private business is announced in the business statement so that people have notice of when it is coming up. I know that Government timetabling of business is always difficult, but we now have a system whereby we know in advance about private Member's Bills days and non-sitting Fridays. I hope that the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons will come up with clear fixed dates for the parliamentary session, so that we know in advance about holidays, not because I want more holidays, but because those with young children need to know such things in advance—indeed, parliamentary Sessions should fit in school holidays. It seems to me that we could timetable private business as well.

My last point is that, as part of the procedure, we should make sure that all those with a potential interest in a private Bill should be formally notified, alerted and briefed, rather than the system allowing for people to find out by being tipped off. To take the example given already—the Southampton International Boat Show Bill—notification should be given to Members of Parliament for the county and the city, Members of the

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other place with an interest, local bodies such as the city council and people who are known to have an interest in the subject of boating and marine affairs. There should be a procedure that ensures that notification is not some sort of accident and that briefs all those concerned at the beginning of a Parliament. These days, there are few private Bills—only half a dozen are affected by the motion and, in the last Parliament, there were only about a dozen. It is not too big a task and I hope we can address the matter and become more effective in dealing with it.

I shall deal now with the substance of the Bills. There are the two Cornish Bills—I call them Cornish, but that is like saying the Scottish play. One is clearly Cornish, but the other affects two counties—

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Greater Cornwall.

Mr. Hughes: The other side of the Tamar cannot be called Greater Cornwall. The Bodmin Moor Commons Bill and the Tamar Bridge Bill are supported by my hon. Friends and they wish them good speed. The first Bill would secure the better management of stock on Bodmin moor and the second would allow improvement of the Tamar bridge, which is the gateway to Cornwall. That improvement is much desired—although in summer the people of Cornwall may wish that fewer people could cross the bridge—and needs to be facilitated. I agree with the hon. Member for Test that the Southampton International Boat Show Bill is the most modest of Bills. I hope that it passes through the House quickly. In fact, it shows the nonsense of the system when a Bill has to be brought to this place in order

"to amend section 60 of the Hampshire Act 1983 to permit the closure of Mayflower Park in Southampton or the restriction of public access to it for 10 rather than 9 consecutive days each year for the purposes of the Southampton International Boat Show; and for connected purposes."

It may be a private sector enterprise, but it strikes me that using private legislation to extend the Southampton boat show for one day is like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

There is a northern Bill to match the southern Bill. The Lever Park Bill

"provides for the extension and adjustment of the boundaries of Lever Park . . . in the boroughs of Bolton and Chorley".

I admit to the House that I know zero about that proposal. No doubt, colleagues in both those parts of the north-west know about the proposal and have an interest in it and in North West Water and North West Water Heritage trust.

The two London Bills to which the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster referred are academic Bills. They form a natural pair because they are part of the general proposals to consolidate academic and teaching medicine in quadrants around London. The Imperial College Bill is the latest in a series of actions that has brought together a considerable number of medical and dental teaching schools in London. The Bill will bring together the Charing Cross and Westminster medical school—where there were originally two hospitals and two medical schools, which I remember on my Universities Central Council on Admissions form—and Imperial college. In general terms, all the advice that I have received suggests that that is a good idea; it brings cross-faculty and cross-specialist improvement. It means that medics are not simply with other medics or dentists with other dentists. It is also meant, I have been told by those who are slightly less pro-medic and pro-dentist, to civilise them so that they have to spend more time with other people.

Mr. Maclean: They need to become vets in that case.

Mr. Hughes: I do not know about that.

I am not sure whether I regard all the faculties at the Imperial college of science, technology and medicine as the most earthly and wide ranging in their interests. We always used to think that the least exciting people at college were the engineers and there are plenty of those at Imperial college. However, the idea is a good one and, clearly, if all parties—academics, boards of governors, undergraduates and postgraduates—want it to go ahead, it is right that it should. I heard what the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster said—that there is a deadline and the merger is wanted by 1 August. That may be a reason for knowing timetables in advance and for fixing things—it would prevent uncertainty.

The last Bill that I have blocked is one that, at the end of the last Parliament, was awaiting its Third Reading: the King's College London Bill, which is jointly promoted. It is promoted by King's college London—a highly esteemed and valuable institution that is an important part of the university of London. King's college is based north of the river in the Cities of London and Westminster constituency and has outposts all over the country, which will also be consolidated. It is also promoted by the united medical and dental school of Guy's and St. Thomas's. There was a merger between two great teaching hospitals over the river and their medical and dental schools.

The Bill will bring together King's college, King's college medical and dental school, which is currently at Denmark Hill, and the united medical and dental school, which is currently principally on the Guy's hospital site in my constituency. It is a great medical and dental school which, I think, has the highest number of research gradings of any academic institution in the country. It is clearly pre-eminent and is of worldwide renown.

I have blocked that Bill: I wanted to use this opportunity to ensure that we did not simply let it go through on the nod. This is the first opportunity that I have had to send out the important message to the new Government that, although the merger does not necessarily threaten the united medical and dental school, there are still some residual concerns involving the present student body—concerns that I trust are now being addressed.

We must ensure that those who applied to and entered a specific institution, graduate from it. That may be a traditional and nostalgic approach, but I believe that if someone applies to Guy's hospital medical school, he or she will want to graduate from it. Guy's medical school is a different institution from a big amalgam of different schools. I hope that we can establish that principle. I have been encouraged by my conversations with the school secretary and with the principals of the two institutions. I hope that we can ensure that those who entered as students of one institution, graduate with that same institution on their degree certificates.

The proposal to merge is a good one, but it is still threatened by some of the implications of the previous Government's plans to move some of the activities from

the Guy's hospital site to the St. Thomas's hospital site. I know that at least one person in the House will not agree with that—my neighbour, the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), who represents St. Thomas's.

The most intensely fought local issue during the general election campaign in my part of Southwark, and one about which then shadow Ministers made promises, was the survival of Guy's hospital. For it to survive as a teaching and research hospital, it needs in-patients as well as out-patients. For it to survive as a credible entity, it needs a minimum number of in-patients. The best advice that I have received suggests that there must be a minimum of 400 in-patient beds. We therefore await with great interest the Government announcement—already considerably delayed—about the moratorium on hospital closures in London. I have made no secret of the fact that I have sought to persuade Ministers that the moratorium should apply not just to hospital closures, but to any rundown of services from the date of the election.

I am asking not for the clock to be stopped, but that we take account of the fact that the first review was based on information that was clearly inaccurate and factually out of date when Tomlinson made his report. We must also take account of rising demand in accident and emergency provision and rises in the number of patients. Above all, we must not agree to something without an assurance that, by the time the Bill reaches the statute book, there will be a viable academic teaching and research institution on the Guy's hospital site.

I have a letter from the principal of King's college and the principal of the united medical and dental school that makes it clear that the viability of the institution in its new format would be threatened if there were an insufficient number of beds. We are about to have the best out-patient facilities in the world in the new Thomas Guy house into which the first patients went earlier this month. It was budgeted to cost £50 million and actually cost £150 million. One can have wonderful out-patient facilities, but I do not think that any hon. Members would say that the real definition of a hospital was something with only out-patient facilities. Once in-patient facilities and casualty units are removed from a hospital, there is only a remote chance of anyone thinking that it is a real and fully functioning institution.

When, last year, I talked to people about the health service and academic medicine in some of the greatest American hospitals, they expressed concern that we should do nothing to undermine some of the best academic institutions in this country. I am privileged to be the Member of Parliament who represents one of them, but there are great hospitals all over the country—in Nottingham, Birmingham and elsewhere. I do not pretend that the one that I represent is the greatest hospital, but I know that it would be wrong for Parliament to legislate to undermine excellence or to take away the things that we do well—such as the Southampton boat show.

If the Government are to honour their implied commitment to the people at the general election, before the Bill returns they must make an announcement about the moratorium on the health service changes in London; they must include the changes at Guy's hospital and at St. Thomas's hospital in that review; they must look again at the issue; and at the end of the debate on those subjects, we must have a guarantee that there will be, for the foreseeable future at least, 400 beds on the Guy's hospital site in addition to all the other facilities.

The case is clear. I hope that the House, and especially the Government, will take it to heart. I hope that we shall proceed to deal with the Bills in the order of whatever is the most urgent in the next few weeks. I hope that, by next year, we shall have a more modern system for private Bills, which will allow the House and the world outside to know what we are doing and will allow all the people who want to participate to do so.

7.30 pm

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak relatively briefly on the carry-over motion, but the House should not treat it as a routine matter.

Traditionally, the idea is that a carry-over motion should be passed after a general election, to allow private Bills that are in the pipeline to continue. I understand the arguments in favour. If money has been spent on drawing up petitions and if evidence has been heard, it is unfair if, through no fault of the promoters, they are obliged to start the process again. However, in my opinion that places some onus on the promoters to try to ensure that the Bill passes in a reasonably short time.

Increasingly, in recent years, it has been assumed that it does not really matter if not much progress is made in one Session; the Bill can be carried over into the next Session and the Session after. I notice that the Bodmin Moor Commons Bill has been knocking around in Parliament for more than four years. That is not a good way to deal with legislation. I believe that Bills should be carried over only once, and that there is a strong onus on the promoters to reach compromises—common in the history of private Bills—to ensure that their legislation passes in a reasonably short period.

Like the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), I believe that the private Bill procedure needs urgent reform. We went a long way to do that with the Transport and Works Act 1992; many of us believed that these sessions at 7 o'clock of an evening in the House would disappear when the 1992 Act came into force. On the whole, it is working well. On Thursday 12 June 1997, the House passed the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (Stratford Station and Subsidiary Works) Order 1997, which enabled one of the inquiries into the Stratford terminal to start, under that procedure.

All the evidence suggested that the 1992 Act was working well—until today, when I received a note from the Ramblers Association about the Welsh highland railway and the fact that some of the provisions of the 1992 Act were not being observed regarding footpaths. I hope that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, will draw to the attention of the Department of Transport the fact that it must ensure that the 1992 Act is used fully and not abused. Otherwise, that method may come into disrepute and more private Bills may end up being debated on the Floor of the House.

As I said in an intervention, private Bills were used a tremendous amount in the 18th and 19th centuries for projects such as canals, railways and reservoirs, and almost always there was much wheeling and dealing behind the scenes. It was fairly common for bargains to be struck. I think I am right that Northampton worked hard to ensure that the railway from London to Birmingham did not go anywhere near Northampton, and then Northampton, having witnessed the benefits of the railway, had to work very hard to try to get a loop line added to it.

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In the 19th century, various great landowners used the blackmail of blocking a Bill in the House of Lords to get their own personal station and to guarantee that express trains stopped there. The tradition of the argument, manipulation and manoeuvring that goes on during the passage of private Bills has a long history.

Legislation should no longer be passed in that way in this country. All private Bills should be dealt with through the Transport and Works Act 1992 or as agreed measures. I should have thought that the wheeling and dealing relating to the Southampton International Boat Show Bill had been done outside the House and all that we needed was a parliamentary Act to give it a rubber stamp, but one or two of the other Bills do not come into that category. The sad history of the Bodmin Moor Commons Bill reveals the way in which the parliamentary procedures do not work well, and need reform.

The Bodmin Moor Commons Bill started as an agreed measure combining three interests—conservation of Bodmin moor, access to the moor and better management of the moor. That would benefit those people who had stock, in that if numbers were limited, grazing would be better and the return from farming activities would be improved.

Had the Bill continued in that vein, it might well have passed through Parliament—this House, at least—without argument, but the Bill was mugged in the House of Lords. People said, "Let us have the sections that give management of the moors, but let us get rid of the access."

I have been unable to discover why Cornwall county council agreed to a deal in the House of Lords that removed all the access provisions from the Bill, destroying the initial compromise agreement. Some of the Labour county councillors for Cornwall, whom I spoke to, were amazed that that deal had been done. I am still waiting to be told on what authority from the county council its agents in the House of Lords removed that clause. One cannot expect the people who originally agreed to the compromise of access, conservation and management, to be happy if a third of the platform was torn away in the House of Lords. That is where the Bill has run into considerable difficulty.

During the past 12 months, when I have been opposing the Bill, I have been asking only that we reinstate the access provisions, to achieve the original compromise. However, the arcane procedure of the House says that a private Bill can only be narrowed. I find that an amazing concept.

If one were promoting a railway and the relevant railway Bill originally said that the line would go from London to Liverpool, I can understand that the last-minute addition of provision for the railway to continue to Preston would be an expansion of the Bill and would be unreasonable. However, if one starts with a Bill that has access in it, balancing conservation measures, it is odd that if access is removed in the House of Lords it cannot be reinstated in the Commons. That is an anomaly. What was narrowing for one group of people was widening for another group. What was widening the rights of the commoners was narrowing the rights of the people to access.

We must get round that. Fortunately, in relation to the Bodmin Moor Commons Bill, there was a way round for the county council, because instead of returning to the House and inserting access clauses into the Bill, it was easy for it to set up access agreements to the moor. I have been arguing that the county council should have got on with that.

Access agreements exist frequently in the Peak district and other parts of Britain. Often they exist by agreement between a county council, a national park and the landowner, but there are examples of access agreements that are arranged by county councils in spite of the opposition of the landowner, and there is a process by which the landowner has a right of appeal but eventually the access agreement can be put in place.

It would have been perfectly possible for Cornwall county council to remedy the problem that it had created. It dropped the access proposals in the House of Lords. Having made a mess of things, it might have put them back in place by using normal legislation for access agreements, and while doing so, might have suspended action on the Bill in the House. By now, the council could have returned to the House and said, "We have binding access agreements in place. May we have the Bill for the management parts?" I would then have been happy to let the Bill go through. But no: the county council did virtually nothing for six months. Then, just before the election, the council again tried to rush the Bill through. Not surprisingly, it was blocked.

One or two people in Cornwall have put it to me that we should let this management Bill go through because the Labour Government are committed to right-to-roam legislation, so by the time the Bodmin Moor Commons Bill is on the statute book that right to roam will nearly be in place. I never count my chickens before they hatch. I think it quite possible that the legislation will take some time to go through Parliament. I therefore believe that it would be wrong to allow the Bodmin Moor Commons Bill to go through before access has been sorted out.

I strongly urge Cornwall county council to get back to negotiations with the landowners and to put access agreements in place.

Interestingly, not far away in the south-west is Dartmoor, for which an agreed access measure was produced allowing for management and access. That private Bill went through the House with no problems and is working well. The farmers enjoy grants for their agriculturally sensitive farms, and access is also in place.

I plead again with Cornwall county council to put access measures in place before returning to this House. We have lined up about 100 amendments to the council's Bill. Neither I nor my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) wants to spend a lot of time arguing the case for those amendments when, if the county council were prepared to negotiate, something could be done much more quickly.

Another Bill on the list is the Lever Park Bill. I was delighted to see it, because it solved a small constituency matter for me—namely, the fact that there are proposals to develop the reservoirs owned by North West Water at Audenshaw. I was pleased to see the company promoting a Bill for the area; it came as confirmation that, if it wants to develop anything at Audenshaw, it will have to go through the private Bill procedure. As I keep assuring my constituents, getting a private Bill through the House is no easy matter.

I began objecting to the Lever Park Bill simply to show North West Water that I was capable of making a fuss about private Bills dealing with reservoirs. The trouble is

that one gets drawn into the process. I warn anyone listening of the snags: showing the slightest inclination towards or knowledge of private Bill procedure induces people to start pressurising an hon. Member and asking him various questions.

The Lever park Bill is designed to introduce a management scheme to the old Bolton reservoirs and the Lever park area around them. That would appear to be a very good idea. I know that the former hon. Member for Chorley was particularly keen on the development of a visitors centre close to the hall, which would improve public access. Equally, some local people do not want more visitors in their back yards.

In order to come up with a management plan, North West Water wanted to get rid of the rights of way running through the area. I can appreciate that the company might find it difficult to negotiate with one or two people who do not want more visitors in their back gardens, but North West Water could and should have entered into detailed negotiations with the Ramblers Association, the Peak and Northern and various other footpath and conservation groups in the area so as to sort out the problems to do with the Bill. Had the company done so, the Bill could have gone through quickly.

I stress again that private Bill procedure should be embarked on as little as possible in the House. Whenever possible, private Bills should be agreed measures that can go through without taking up time. Whenever possible, the Transport and Works Act should be used. If people want to introduce Bills, they must demonstrate that they are prepared to negotiate and arrive at compromises, removing any controversial issues.

I hope that Cornwall county council will get down to serious negotiations if it wants the Bodmin Moor Commons Bill to progress; the access problems must be solved. I also hope that North West Water will talk to the people concerned about access under the Lever Park Bill so that that issue, too, can be solved.

7.44 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I do not oppose the carrying over of private Bills described in the motion, but I want to comment briefly on a glaring anomaly in the procedure. It concerns the Transport and Works Act; I am sure that both the shadow spokesman and the Minister responsible will deal with the matter in their speeches later this evening. Perhaps the usual channels, or a Select Committee, or a brief consultation document issued by the Government will resolve the issue. In any event, some urgent procedure is required to deal with the anomaly.

The Transport and Works Act works well—if the works take place solely in England or in Wales. But a company called Border Transport Futures proposes to build about 16 miles of railway line between Scotland and England in part of my constituency and part of that of the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood). The company has decided to use the private Bill procedure instead of an alternative. Such an alternative is available, but it is slightly more complicated because the works are partly in Scotland and partly in England.

Last year I checked with the Department of Transport and the then Minister wrote to me to say:

"I can confirm that this railway could be authorised either by Private Bill or a combination of the Private Legislation Procedure (Scotland) Act 1936 and an Order made under the Transport and Works Act. I can see, however, that the promoters are likely to favour the private Bill procedure"—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt, but I am having some difficulty spotting the connection between the right hon. Gentleman's remarks about a future Bill and a motion for the continuation of six current Bills.

Mr. Maclean: I certainly believe, Sir Alan, that those Bills should be carried over into this Parliament, but I am expressing reservations about the procedure. It could allow—unjustly—some Bills to be carried forward which, while they should complete all their stages in one or two Sessions at most, may in fact take three or four years to complete. That will give their promoters an unfair advantage, while protesters against such Bills would incur a great deal of expenditure over a long period of time.

There would, moreover, be much uncertainty if the promoters of such a Bill were lackadaisical. The promoters of the Bodmin Moor Commons Bill may be slightly lackadaisical about getting their measure through Parliament. I am worried about a loophole in our procedures that could allow a lackadaisical company such as Border Transport Futures to exploit the anomaly and to go for a private Bill procedure that would be rather complicated because it relates to both countries in the Union. Such a measure, if proceeded with, might be carried over from Session to Session—even beyond another general election.

I was going to conclude, Sir Alan, by saying that these procedures could apply to any of the Bills under discussion this evening—

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): Another element of this procedure is blight. Some of these Bills are used to promote serious construction works— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) should sit in his place while another hon. Member is speaking.

Mr. Rowe: I was just saying that a number of those Bills are used to promote construction projects, the principal victims of which are private citizens whose properties are blighted by whatever is projected. If the promoters are allowed to proceed lackadaisically, the blight is perpetuated.

Mr. Maclean: That is correct. Blight has already been caused in my constituency by the prospectus that BTF issued saying that it intends to go for the private Bill procedure. That has caused considerable concern to landowners and householders in my constituency. One reason why the company wants to do that is that it hopes to get compulsory purchase powers in the Bill so that it will not have to pay the full market value of the land.

The Transport and Works Act 1992 was passed by the House to avoid new railways legislation, for example, going through the House as private Bills. At that time,

[Mr. Maclean]

the House had no thought whatever that someone might come along one day with a railways Bill that would apply partly to Scotland and partly to England. It should not be beyond the wit of the House, a Select Committee or a Minister to issue a short consultation paper, which would find favour on both sides of the House, suggesting that the House does not wish to see another private railways Bill before it next year or the year after. Such a Bill would bog up Committees and take up time in the House whereas it could be dealt with either through an amended Transport and Works Act or by some procedure agreed with the Scottish Office, which would apply the same procedures in principle as the Transport and Works Act.

That is the plea that I make tonight. I appreciate that I cannot expand the point properly because I would be discussing a Bill that is not before the House, but I shall have no other opportunity in the foreseeable future to raise the general point of principle about that little anomaly in our procedure, which, with good will on both sides, could easily be plugged.

7.51 pm

Mr. Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): It is with great reluctance that I rise to speak to this motion, which revives six Bills—as hon. Gentlemen have already said, there is a great deal of good in many of them. The House should examine private Bill procedure; we are making a decision that affects all the Bills as a group, so if we want to object to the revival of just one, under the terms of this motion, we must object to them all. That is not a sensible way to proceed. We should consider the notion of linkage in the future.

I want to object to two of the Bills because the promoters are at fault in two respects: first, they have been dilatory—they have not made progress with the Bills; secondly, they have shown a gross reluctance and inability to consult and compromise. I particularly wish to discuss the Bodmin Moor Commons Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) has already mentioned it and I want forcefully to support one of the points he made. I am surprised that, under the private Bill procedure, a Bill can be narrowed but not widened.

When the Bodmin Moor Commons Bill first came to the other place, it contained access provisions, but they were quickly dropped. When it came before this House, many of us wanted to argue that cause but were told firmly that the Bill had been narrowed and that we could not add to it. A third of the original Bill was about access, but that provision had been dropped in the other place and we were unable to argue for its inclusion. That procedure is wrong and needs reviewing.

I am reluctant to oppose the Bodmin Moor Commons Bill as it contains many good provisions. I criticise it for sins of omission rather than sins of commission, which is a bit like arguing about a Jane Austen novel from a Marxist perspective. Marx would argue that the novel contains nothing about the Napoleonic war; I argue that the provisions of the Bill are good but that what is left out ought not to be.

The promoters, particularly Cornwall county council, should hear the voices that want access on Bodmin moor. The Bill could do a great deal of good in Cornwall. I admire its conservation aims and believe that the promoters are right to want better husbandry on the commons, but they disregard other voices. We are now in an age in which people should listen to all the voices and try to compromise.

The promoters argue that those of us who object to the Bill are urbanites. They try to characterise the argument as rural versus urban communities. That is old politics and they would be wise to listen to all the voices, because those of us who love and care for the countryside know that it can develop only if the right balance is struck between all its needs and the different demands on it. That is where the Bill is fatally flawed. It was good in its original form. I remind the House that it received its Second Reading on 7 June 1994 in the other place. It has had more than three years to make progress.

I have been surprised at the promoters' stop-start attitude. They have sought to make progress when that suited them but, despite pleas from many of us and meetings that we set up to make progress, they have not consistently tried to take the Bill forward. They deserve criticism for that; it is a fundamental reason why the Bill should be opposed tonight—the promoters have had more than three years to get it through the House.

The most damning criticism of the Bodmin Moor Commons Bill is the lack of consultation and Cornwall county council's inability to compromise and listen to other voices. The Bill's history speaks for itself. Prior to its publication, a number of organisations such as the Ramblers Association and the Open Spaces Society wanted to talk with the promoters, the county council, about the Bill's progress so that it could be put into practice quickly. The county council ran away from those talks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish and I attended a meeting in the Palace of Westminster earlier this year at which members of Cornwall county council were surprised that the access element of the Bill had been withdrawn in the other place. They had not been told. A decision had been made somewhere within the county council which had neglected to tell a proportion of its members. That cannot be good practice.

Several of us have set up meetings with the county council to explain that, although the access provisions were withdrawn in the other place, the Bill allows the setting up of a commoners council which, within two years, must produce a management plan. The county council has made no progress in getting people round the table to try to build up an access plan. Various organisations, such as the Ramblers Association, have offered to start those meetings and provide a facilitator. I am surprised that the county council has not taken the matter forward.

If the Bill is to make progress—I wish it well and want it to succeed—the promoters must listen to other voices. The Bill could do much for Bodmin moor, Cornwall and those of us who love the countryside.

Another Bill before the House is the Lever Park Bill. That, like Bodmin moor, is an area that I know well. Things need to be done at Lever park. North West Water is right to try to bring about management changes. Once again, it must heed the voice of local people and use its own resources. The company is not short of money to make improvements at Lever park. I note that one of the objectives of the Lever Park Bill is to bring national

lottery money into Lever park. The Lever Park Bill would make progress if the promoters were to consult and look for consensus, and if they gave an undertaking to use their own resources to better Lever park, which does, indeed, need betterment.

The private Bill procedure is out of date and out of time, and needs review, but it is what we have at present. Those of us who are accused of being urbanites are disregarded and given bad press reports. My plea to the promoters of both Bills, which are about enhancing the environment and lifting the landscape, is to listen to our voices, too. The countryside is for all of us. We aspire to leave a better environment for our children. The promoters of both Bills should listen to our voices, consult and compromise. Then we can all go forward to leave to our children the legacy that we so desire.

8.2 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I apologise for not having been in the House for the whole of the debate, but I have been serving the House in the Select Committee on the revision of the management of the House. I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping). Having been Chairman of the Procedure Committee for the past 14 years, I hope that he will not cast any of his aspersions on me, because the Procedure Committee is allowed to deal only with public business and has no control over the aspects of private business that the hon. Gentleman criticised.

I ought to declare an interest at the start. Although I do not believe that I have to, I always like to do so. I am the chairman, entirely unpaid, of the National Asthma Campaign, which has some obvious interest in the National Heart and Lung Institute referred to in the Imperial College Bill.

I want to say a few words about the procedure and the Imperial College Bill. I think that the procedure is right. A great deal of time, effort and money is put into the promotion of such Bills, but they are often cut off as time cannot be found for them in the legislative timetable, usually because Government business has left insufficient time for private business. It is therefore only right and proper that there should be an opportunity to carry those Bills forward into a new Session, as proposed.

Mr. Bennett: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the Chairman of Ways and Means has the absolute right to name time for private business? My experience is that he takes no notice of Government pressure, and names time. Any dilatoriness about the Bills is entirely down to the promoters, not to the Chairman of Ways and Means.

Sir Peter Emery: I cannot speak for all the Bills, only for the Imperial College Bill. I do not believe that that is a fair assessment, as I have watched with interest as the Bill has come to the other place and then to this place.

I have some connection with the Charing Cross and Westminster hospitals and I have seen the training carried out in them, often under the leadership of Professor Roger Greenhalgh, who has been the dean and professor of surgery at Charing Cross hospital and who has done so much to bring about the amalgamation of the Westminster and Charing Cross hospitals into the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine, which I believe will in due course become the leading centre for training of medical personnel in the whole of London. A new building is being constructed for it.

It is only right and proper that the Charing Cross and Westminster medical school and the National Heart and Lung Institute should be brought together, as the Bill proposes, to create that centre of learning. It would be a tragedy if the Bill were further delayed. After the excellent speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), I need say no more other than to point out the interesting fact that under clause 10 nobody may pick up the names of the Charing Cross and Westminster medical school, the Royal postgraduate medical school or the National Heart and Lung Institute until 25 years have lapsed, without the approval of Imperial college.

At this late hour, to allow hon. Members to go to dinner, I shall sit down—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] If hon. Members say that, I might go on too long. With the support of the House, which I see will readily be given, I am sure that we can proceed properly and fully.

8.7 pm

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): I rise after a little more than five years of oratorical abstinence in the Chamber, due to my time doing good by stealth in the Government Whips Office. Now, in my capacity as the acting deputy shadow Leader of the House, may I say that we entirely endorse the motion, not because we necessarily support any of the Bills that are being revived, but simply because we believe that it is right and proper that each of the Bills should be judged on its merit and properly scrutinised in this Session.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) was right to say, in a fascinating speech, that we should review the possibility of allowing a Bill to be revived only once through one Session, and that there should be penalties if the promoters are unduly dilatory. With that proviso, the Opposition entirely support the motion.

8.9 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): I rise to express the Government's hopes that the House will agree to the motion. However, we believe that the hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) suits the role of a Trappist rather more than that of a preaching black friar.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), and my hon. Friends the Members for Southampton, Test (Mr. Whitehead) and for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) raised proper constituency or party political interests on the back of this motion. My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) was as erudite as usual on this subject, regarding both the history and the practice of procedural matters. I undertake to pass on his comments to the appropriate Ministers. I make the same pledge to the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), who raised an anomaly that I am sure will be of great interest to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe)—who is not in his place—made a rather curious intervention about blight, which left me in mind of what is occurring in another place regarding the leadership of the Conservative party.

[Mr. Peter Kilfoyle]

The purpose of the motion is to allow the revival of the private Bills that were before the House at the end of the last Parliament, as the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) said, and which fell automatically at the Dissolution of Parliament. The motion will enable them to be proceeded with in this Session at the stages they had reached at the end of last Session. As the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, there are many precedents for carrying forward private Bills in this way in order to avoid unnecessary expense and delay.

The motion is concerned solely with procedure. Those hon. Members who wish to make points of substance about any of the Bills to which this motion applies will have every opportunity to do so when the legislation that they are concerned about comes to the House for its next stage. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That—

(1) the Promoters of every Private Bill which originated in this House or was brought from the House of Lords in the last Parliament shall have leave to proceed with that Bill, if they think fit, in the present Session;

(2) every such Bill which originated in this House shall be presented to the House not later than the fifth day on which the House sits after this day;

(3) there shall be deposited with every Bill so presented a declaration signed by the Agent for the Bill, stating that the Bill is the same, in every respect, as the Bill at the last stage of its proceedings in this House in the last Parliament;

(4) every Bill so presented shall be laid by one of the Clerks in the Private Bill Office on the Table of the House on the next meeting of the House after the day on which the Bill was presented;

(5) every Bill so laid on the Table shall be deemed to have been read the first time and (if the Bill had been read a second time in the last Parliament) to have been read a second time and—

(i) if such Bill had been referred to the Committee on Unopposed Bills in the last Parliament, it shall stand so referred;

(ii) if such Bill had been referred to a Committee during the last Parliament and not reported by that Committee to the House, the Bill shall stand committed and—

(a) all Petitions against the Bill which stood referred to the Committee on the Bill shall stand referred to the Committee on the Bill in the present Session, subject to the determination of any outstanding objection to the locus standi of any petitioner; and

(b) any minutes of evidence taken before the Committee on the Bill shall stand referred to the Committee on the Bill in the present Session;

(iii) if such Bill had been reported by any Committee, it shall be ordered to be read the third time unless it had been reported with Amendments in the last Parliament and had not been considered as so amended, in which case it shall be ordered to lie upon the Table;

(iv) if such Bill had been read the third time in the last Parliament, it shall be deemed to have been read the third time;

(6) paragraph (2) of Standing Order 166 relating to Private Business (First reading) shall not apply to any Bill brought from the House of Lords in the present Session and to which this Order relates;

(7) when any Bill which was brought from the House of Lords in the last Parliament and to which this Order relates is brought from the House of Lords in the present Session, the Agent for the Bill shall deposit in the Private Bill Office a declaration, signed by him, stating that the Bill is the same, in every respect, as the Bill which was brought from the House of Lords in the last Parliament and, as soon as a certificate by one of the Clerks in the Private Bill Office that such a declaration has been so deposited has been laid upon the Table of the House—

(i) unless the Examiner had reported pursuant to Standing Order 74 relating to Private Business (Examination of bills brought from the House of Lords, etc.), the Bill shall stand referred to the Examiners;

(ii) if the Examiner had so reported, the Bill shall be ordered to be read a second time, or, if it had been read a second time, it shall be read a second time and committed; but

(iii) if the Bill had been reported by a Committee with Amendments in the last Parliament it shall be committed to the Chairman of Ways and Means who shall make only such Amendments to the Bill as had been made thereto by the Committee in the last Parliament, and shall report the Bill to the House forthwith, and the Bill shall be ordered to lie upon the Table;

(8) any Bill which under the provisions of this Order is deemed to have been read the first time, or the first and second time, or the first, second and third time, shall be recorded in the Journal of the House as having been so read;

(9) without prejudice to the provisions of paragraph (5) of this Order, only those Petitions against any Bill which stood referred to the Committee on the Bill and which had not been withdrawn or had been deposited pursuant to paragraph (b) of Standing Order 126 relating to Private Business (Reference to committee of petitions against bill) shall stand referred to the Committee on the same Bill in the present Session;

(10) in relation to any Bill to which this Order applies Standing Order 127 relating to Private Business (Right of audience before committees on opposed bills) shall have effect as if the words "under Standing Order 126 (Reference to committee of petitions against bill)" were omitted;

(11) where any Standing Order had been dispensed with in respect of any private Bill in the last Parliament, those Standing Orders shall be deemed to have been ordered to be dispensed with in respect of any such Bill presented or brought from the Lords in pursuance of this Order;

(12) any Standing Orders complied with in respect of any Bill originating in the House of Lords to which this Order relates shall be deemed to have been complied with in respect of such Bill if the same is brought from the House of Lords in the present Session, and any notices published or given and any deposits made in respect of such Bill in the last Parliament shall be held to have been published, given and made, respectively, for the Bill so brought from the House of Lords in the present Session;

(13) no further fees shall be charged in respect of proceedings on a Bill in respect of which fees have been incurred in the last Parliament.

Firearms (Amendment) Bill

Again considered in Committee.

To report progress and ask leave to sit again.—[*Mr. Jamieson.*]

Committee report progress; to sit again tomorrow.

Private Medical Insurance (Tax Relief)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

8.12 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): I begin by welcoming the Financial Secretary to her new responsibilities, and by wishing her well. I raise this issue tonight because I received several letters during the recent election campaign from elderly constituents expressing concern about Labour and Liberal Democrat proposals to scrap tax relief for private medical insurance. Perhaps I should also declare a sort of interest in the debate: the law firm I founded has a corporate private health scheme for staff. I have a constituency interest also, as Private Patients Plan is a major and respected employer in Eastbourne.

My hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins), who is not in his place, wished to be present for my Adjournment debate, as he is the sponsor of early-day motion 26 concerning tax relief for medical insurance. However, illness in the family has sadly prevented his attendance tonight. I know that he takes a close and detailed interest in this issue.

For once, we have a clear pledge from the new Labour Government: in this case, to abolish private medical insurance. In opposition, Labour made no secret of its hostility towards it. It might be helpful to examine the background to this issue. The White Paper, "Working for Patients", which was published by the previous Government in January 1989, set out the growing importance of the private medical insurance sector in this country. It referred to

> "the increase in the provision of medical insurance cover by companies for their employees. But in most cases this cover stops when an individual retires. As a result, people are faced with deciding whether to take out cover as individuals at a time when their income has fallen and when medical insurance premiums rise."

There is no general tax relief for the costs of private health care, but tax relief is given for private health insurance for the over-60s. That relief is given by making a deduction from the amount of the premiums due, so that even non-taxpayers benefit.

In the 1989 Budget, the then Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, announced that the relief would come into effect from April 1990. In the November 1993 Budget, the then Chancellor, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), announced that the relief would be limited to the basic rate of tax with effect from April 1994.

One obvious reason for limiting the relief at that time was that it had become quite expensive because it had become popular. The total cost of relief is estimated at £120 million in 1997–98. That sum is payable in respect of some 400,000 contracts, providing cover for about 600,000 individuals. When the relief was introduced, only 400,000 individuals were covered—so it is easy to see the rapid rise in its popularity.

It is estimated that 5 per cent. of the population of the United Kingdom over the age of 60 have a tax relief PMI plan. In my constituency, there are some 600 subscribers—involving 1,150 people, as obviously some policies cover a couple or a family—to PPP alone. The number of my constituents who have plans with other

[Mr. Nigel Waterson]

providers—I gather there are about 30 in the market at present—will be much higher. I have no doubt that a high percentage of those subscribers are over 60. According to recent statistics, some 40 per cent. of voters in my constituency are over retirement age.

The growth in the appeal of private medical insurance to the over-60s is interesting. As the Association of British Insurers has pointed out, three factors might lead one to expect that fewer older people would be covered by medical insurance. Those issues were addressed in the 1989 White Paper.

The first factor is the increased cost of insurance as one grows older. Secondly, as a rule, that portion of the population does not have access to employer-provided insurance. Thirdly, the over-60s tend to have less disposable income than those in full-time employment. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude—as the ABI did—that the tax relief on these premiums is a major factor in encouraging a high level of take-up among the over-60s.

Labour spokesmen often try to drive a wedge between the NHS and private health provision for purely dogmatic reasons. The fact is that the two ways of providing health care in this country are complementary, and—as I shall demonstrate in a moment—a substantial fall in private health provision could cause major problems for the NHS. We should remember also that elderly subscribers to PMI have supported the NHS throughout their working lives by paying tax and national insurance contributions. They have made a personal decision—a choice—to use some of their spare resources to acquire PMI cover. The Government want to abolish that choice.

There is also considerable logic in providing tax relief only for the over-60s because, first, premiums naturally increase with age; and, secondly, upon retirement, people often take over the payment of premiums after leaving a corporate scheme. Tax relief therefore helps to ease the transition from the world of work to retirement.

There is no doubt that private medical insurance carries a major burden in terms of health care for the over-60s. We know that 80 per cent. of the premiums paid on such plans are paid out in treatment costs. The private sector now treats 28 per cent. of all hip operations, 20 per cent. of all heart conditions and 20 per cent. of all acute conditions.

Figures provided to me by Prime Health show that 6,840 hip or knee-joint replacement operations alone were carried out in the past eight months, at a cost of about £40.5 million. The average stay in hospital was 10.85 days for this procedure, equating to a potential of nearly 72,000 days' accommodation for hip and knee-joint replacement patients.

Apart from hip replacements, other common procedures such as cataract removal, coronary bypass and prostatectomy operations carried out on customers increased by no less than 30 per cent. in 1996 over 1995.

I have already said that people already expect their premiums to increase as they grow older. There are also yearly adjustments for inflation. The ABI tells me that that means that there is already a natural incidence of lapses in cover and what is called trading down, which is buying a policy with lesser benefits.

My argument is that policyholders know in advance that their premium costs are likely to increase, and can therefore budget and plan to meet likely increases. The ABI tells me that the industry average for the lapsed rate is between 5 and 10 per cent., rising to between 15 and 20 per cent. when age-related increases are made to the premium rates.

The removal of tax relief at 23 per cent. means that policyholders will in effect pay an extra 30 per cent. According to Prime Health, its research has shown that, when an increase of 30 per cent. was mentioned, 35 per cent. of policyholders said that they would cancel their policies or look for a replacement policy. According to the ABI, some companies estimate that up to 50 per cent. of policyholders would lapse their policies.

That is not all. There is also what the ABI calls a domino effect. As the number of existing PMI policyholders decreases, an additional burden will be placed on remaining contributors. That in itself would increase the cost of premiums yet further, causing even more policyholders to lapse their cover. I am told that there would also be significant administrative costs to the insurers in abolishing tax relief.

But, I hear you ask, Mr. Deputy Speaker, "Does this matter?" Surely these people could revert to relying on the NHS for any medical care they needed. Well, let us remember that we are talking about an age group of whom many will already have a pre-existing condition, which in turn makes it difficult for them to shift health schemes or trade down, or who, because of their age, are more likely to develop health problems than younger sections of the population.

National health service hospitals such as my local district general hospital would suffer if the Chancellor of the Exchequer removed the relief. Thirteen pence in every pound paid out, for example, by PPP goes to the NHS. That amounts to about £220,000 paid to the NHS by PPP alone every working day, or £55 million a year. That is only one company.

I do not have the figures for all the other companies, including, for example, BUPA, but no doubt the Minister will be able to supply them in her reply. The point is that the Government would have to find additional resources merely to maintain the financial status quo. Additional costs, which are difficult to quantify, would also arise for the NHS because many subscribers are elderly and require expensive treatments, and more often.

I hope that the Minister has her own best estimate of the revenue stream that would be lost, and also the knock-on costs of many current elderly subscribers reverting to health care on the NHS.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend. I am listening with great care to what he has to say. I wonder whether, in his research, he has carried out any costings on the differential between abolishing tax relief on private medical insurance and the cost to the national health service of those people who will inevitably have to opt out of PMI and into the NHS, thereby costing the NHS a considerable sum. Is he able to tell the House the sums involved?

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who in his inimitable fashion has put his finger on the central issue. It is easy to draw attention to the figures on the one side, which are the savings to the Treasury. I think that the Minister referred to them in a written answer recently, and stated that they would amount to £120 million.

On the other side of the equation are two significant areas of costs. Direct revenue will be lost from the private sector to the NHS on a daily and yearly basis. In addition, there will be all the additional costs to which my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton–Brown) has referred, as a result of policyholders opting out and lapsing their policies, and relying on the NHS instead. That is the key point.

The plain truth is that there is a massive contradiction at the heart of the new Government's policy on this issue. My right hon. and hon. Friends will well remember that, during the election, the Labour party made five major pledges, one of which was that it would cut NHS waiting lists by 100,000. I think that Labour party members even carried little cards setting out their five major pledges. In fact, their proposal to abolish tax relief for PMI would put greater strains on NHS resources.

In my constituency, with a high proportion of elderly residents and many PMI subscribers, I have little doubt that waiting lists would lengthen, not least because some of the elderly who were previously relying on private health care would be waiting for difficult and expensive treatments from the NHS. I must stress to the Minister that the constant theme in the letters I have received on the subject from constituents has been that it was tax relief that made the cover attainable, and that removing it would make all the difference as to whether they could continue paying their premiums.

The Government may rethink their proposal—I certainly hope they will—but if, for what are clearly dogmatic party political reasons, they are determined to proceed, may I urge upon the Minister the ABI's view that, at the very least, the withdrawal of the tax relief should be phased? There has already been a reduction in the maximum tax relief from 40 to 23 per cent. There was a similar staged reduction in tax relief on mortgage interest, which is a useful parallel.

I have already said that the relief costs about £120 million a year. Against it, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold has said, must be weighed the extra costs to the NHS of subscribers who give up their PMI as a result of losing relief. As I have described, we could be talking of up to 300,000 people. The Minister's reply will be entirely meaningless unless she can tackle that specific question, and in detail. There are worrying parallels with other Government policies, such as the recent Bill to abolish the assisted places scheme. Like that measure, the one that we are discussing is petty and vindictive, with no tangible saving. It has at its heart the desire to remove choice.

The proposed measure is yet another policy initiative that has not been properly thought through. Perhaps it should join the ever lengthening queue of reviews promised by the Government. It is yet another attack on pensioners in our society. We may well see an attack on private pension provision in the forthcoming Budget. Now it is being suggested that pensioners should pay prescription charges, and that those going into hospital or being visited by a general practitioner should also be charged. None of these dramatic departures from the founding principles of the NHS appeared in the Labour manifesto.

Mr. Clifton–Brown: I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend again. Is it not at the heart of the issue that pensioners whose income is on the margin will have to relinquish their private health schemes? We are talking not of wealthy pensioners but of those whose income is at the margin. That is what is so cruel.

Mr. Waterson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I have described, it is just one of a series of measures that the Government have brought forward, or will bring forward, that will have the effect of disadvantaging pensioners in my constituency, in my hon. Friend's constituency, and across the country.

I urge the Government not to break faith with pensioners in respect of private medical insurance.

8.29 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Dawn Primarolo): I congratulate the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) on securing the debate. He made a number of interesting points about tax relief for private medical insurance, to which I paid careful attention.

I realise that tax relief on private medical insurance is a matter of some interest to many of the hon. Gentleman's constituents, and I hope that he will understand if I do not comment on the possibility of any future tax changes affecting this relief. It would not be appropriate for me to anticipate in any way what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer may do in his forthcoming Budget. I am sure that, in this, the hon. Gentleman had no great expectations.

Tax relief for premiums paid on private medical insurance for the over-60s is of fairly recent origin. It was introduced only in 1989 and took effect from 1 April 1990. When it was first introduced, as the hon. Gentleman said, relief was given at both the basic and higher rates of tax. That did not last long. Relief at the higher rate was withdrawn with effect from 6 April 1994 in relation to payments made on or after that date.

That change reflects, perhaps, a less than total commitment to the relief by the then Government. It is certainly true that, when the relief was first introduced, there were reservations even on the Conservative Benches about whether it was right to give such a tax relief. Indeed, on Second Reading, the previous hon. Member for Beaconsfield expressed "major reservations" about the introduction of such a tax relief.

The tax relief is not unconditional. There are restrictions about the type of treatment that can be included if payments under a contract of insurance are to qualify for the relief. To qualify, a private medical insurance contract can offer only certain approved benefits, which, broadly speaking, are limited to medical and surgical treatments of a kind normally available in the national health service.

When the relief was introduced in 1990, the then Government stated that they intended the relief to encourage the take-up of medical insurance by older people. Arguments against the relief centred on the fact that the cost was largely what is known as dead weight. It would primarily benefit those who had already taken out medical insurance or who would have done so anyway. Events have largely confirmed the truth of that concern.

[Dawn Primarolo]

In the period from 1990–91 to 1996–97, the estimated number of contracts rose by only 25,000, from 350,000 to 375,000. The number of people covered by such contracts rose, on our estimates, from about 500,000 to 550,000. It seems that the cost of this relief continues to be largely dead weight—that is, going to people who have already decided to take out medical insurance. In addition, a tax relief for a select group of taxpayers ran counter to the policy of having a broad tax base and low rates. That was the stated policy of the then Government, but they chose to make an exception in this instance.

Let me assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are not opposed to private medical treatment; it clearly has a part to play in the care of people in this country. The public sector, which is supremely important in its provision, can have a good working relationship with the private sector.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that I have taken note of all his comments and concerns on behalf of his constituents, and that any of my right hon. Friend's decisions will be based on effective and genuine need and on a proper assessment of what is best for the taxpayers of this country. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government intend to support the health service, to continue to support the lowest-paid pensioners, and to do nothing to undermine their access to the national health service.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-six minutes to Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 17 June 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

Devolution (Referendum)

1. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received concerning the proposed form of the question for the proposed referendum on Scottish devolution. [2329]

The Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office (Mr. Henry McLeish): The Scottish Office has received seven representations, of which five have suggested that independence or the status quo should also be an option put to the electorate and two have commented on the style of the ballot paper.

Mr. Amess: I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box. Now that the new Labour party has led the British people to what is perceived to be the promised land, will the Minister explain to my constituents in Southend, West how it can be fair that they will not be involved in the referendum process? Furthermore, how can he justify the fact that those who will be involved in the referendum process have no precise idea of what they are being consulted about?

Mr. McLeish: I am delighted to welcome the hon. Gentleman to Scottish questions. The question whether there should be a Scottish Parliament is primarily for the people in Scotland. The details of the proposals will be open for debate by all UK Members of Parliament during the passage of the devolution Bill. We think that that is important because it gives the people of Scotland a chance to vote on the two questions in the referendum and to give their consent, and it then allows the devolution Bill to be properly and thoroughly discussed in the House. That should reassure not only the hon. Gentleman but his constituents.

Mr. McAllion: The form of the question in the referendum and other matters relating to the referendum are currently the subject of debate in the other place. Therefore, may I have an assurance from my hon. Friend that he will not suffer any lessons in the democratic running of a referendum from those who owe their place in Parliament either to hereditary privilege or to political patronage? Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to remind our noble brothers and sisters that Scotland is a democracy where sovereignty rests with the people, that the people have elected Members of this House to decide on the referendum and that peers interfere in that democratic exercise at their peril?

Mr. McLeish: I fully acknowledge my hon. Friend's comments. However, in the spirit of good will in which we have tried to conduct the debate, I hope that, in another place, there will be reasonable debate and scrutiny of the legislation, and that it will be serious and sensible. I feel very relaxed in the belief that the peers will do that and I do not think that there is anything to be fearful of at this stage.

Mrs. Ewing: I welcome the hon. Gentleman and the full team to the Scottish Office and their new responsibilities. Does the hon. Gentleman share my recognition that the rather offensive comments made during the passage of the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill by Conservative Members and the questions scattered throughout the Order Paper today show that they have learned absolutely nothing from their behaviour in the previous Parliament? Might that not explain the total absence of any Conservative Member north of the Tweed?

Mr. McLeish: Again, I appreciate the hon. Lady's points. It is important for the House to be reminded that the party that promoted the status quo in Scotland did not return a single Member to this House. On the other hand, we want to see the devolution proposals go forward in a spirit that reflects their importance to the people of Scotland. That is why I hope that even Conservative Members will accept my point that this is a vital matter. Clearly, we do not want to see a repetition in the other place of some of the frivolous questions posed in this House.

Mr. Canavan: On the question of consulting the people of Scotland through the ballot box, is it not rather ironic that some of the most vociferous opponents of a Scottish Parliament are Tory rejects who were kicked out by the people of Scotland through the ballot box? I think of people such as the Earl of Ancram—now the right hon. Member for Devizes—Lord Fraser of Carmyllie and Lord MacKay of Ardbrecknish. It is no wonder that the Tories suffered a complete wipeout in Scotland. When will they ever learn?

Mr. McLeish: My hon. Friend makes some reasonable points. Conservative Members, wherever they come from, should acknowledge that this is a very important issue. They should also learn the important lessons of the election on 1 May, which showed that constitutional change is high on the agenda of Scots. We want to move forward on that as quickly as possible.

Mr. Ancram: Does the Minister agree that the proposal in the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill for "a Scottish Parliament" could be supported equally by those seeking independence, who might regard it as the first step along that road, and those, such as the Secretary of State, who claim that it would save the Union? As both cannot be right, does he agree that the current proposition is a dangerous and dishonest fudge and that the only honest course would be to set out the three real options: independence; a devolved, tax-raising Parliament; and the status quo? Or is he frightened of the answer that the Scottish people might give?

Mr. McLeish: I utterly reject the right hon. Gentleman's assertions on two counts. The only party that

had the temerity to favour the status quo was—I choose my words carefully—annihilated. The Scottish people also clearly rejected separatism on 1 May and endorsed our proposals. The Scots will be asked to vote yes, yes in the referendum on the basis of the White Paper that we shall publish before we rise for the summer.

Inward Investment

2. **Mr. Roy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland which companies have announced plans to invest in Scotland since 1 May. [2330]

The Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): Since 1 May, ABB Wylex, Award plc, BBR Systems, BT, Canon, ClinTrials Research, FLEXcon, Midland Bank, North American Bolt and Screw Co., Tesco and Yaskawa Electric have announced plans to invest in Scotland. Together, those plans involve the creation of more than 2,200 new jobs.

Mr. Roy: I thank my hon. Friend for his encouraging answer. Does he agree that that blows away the myth created by the Scottish Conservatives—who were, in turn, blown away by the electorate on 1 May—that Scotland would not be able to attract inward investment under a new Labour Government committed to a Scottish Parliament with tax-varying powers, to the social chapter and to a national minimum wage? Will he also join me in congratulating North Lanarkshire council on the effort that it put into obtaining a £10 million investment from the Bank of Scotland for my constituency of Motherwell and Wishaw, which was announced in the past few days?

Mr. Wilson: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. The only people who believed the Tory propaganda before the election were the unfortunate ones spouting it. They got their answer in no uncertain terms. I have spoken to representatives of several of the companies that I mentioned. They were well aware of the Labour party's proposals on constitutional change, the social chapter, the minimum wage and the rest of it. Those proposals did not influence their decisions. The Tories were simply putting about scare stories, as has been quickly exposed. The decisions were based on the quality of the work force available and the educational basis, as well as the good environment that we can offer in Scotland. I hope to have many more such announcements to make.

Mr. Kirkwood: How many of the new jobs have come to south-east Scotland? Is the Minister aware of the concern expressed locally about employment prospects in the textile industries, particularly in towns such as Hawick, in my constituency, which is suffering from a combination of overseas competition, new technology and the current strength of the pound? Is he prepared to bring together a team of experts and come to Hawick to examine what the Government can do to underpin employment prospects in the hosiery industry in towns such as Hawick, together with the possibilities for a diversification package for the future?

Mr. Wilson: I am well aware that the hon. Gentleman has been involved in those matters over a long period. I should be delighted to come to Hawick with officials and experts to discuss his precise concerns, and I shall make arrangements to do so.

Mr. Home Robertson: Is my hon. Friend aware that investors from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are keen to gain access to competitively priced Scottish electricity? He will recall that Michael Forsyth blocked proposals for an interconnector between the Scottish and Irish electricity systems. Does he expect to make an announcement shortly?

Mr. Wilson: Yes.

Sir Peter Tapsell: As my mother's family, the Hannays of Sorbie, have lived in Galloway since the ninth century, may I venture to ask the first question on Scottish affairs in my parliamentary career on behalf not only of myself but of the considerable number of my Scottish constituents who have relations living in Scotland? If, as a result of this exercise, Scottish taxation is to be higher than British taxation, will the Japanese and American firms which have been pouring investment into Scotland still wish to do so?

Mr. Wilson: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his antecedents.

The proof of the pudding is in what we have produced in the past month. It is quite clear that investment decisions were made in the full knowledge of the changes that were proposed. Companies in the United States, Taiwan, Korea and Japan probably paid some attention to the opinion polls and expected a Labour Government to be elected. They made investment decisions on that basis and will continue to do so. They will welcome the decentralisation that will enable us to attract projects to Scotland with even more encouragement and enthusiasm.

A90 (Road Safety)

3. **Mr. Swinney:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will undertake an urgent review of road safety on the A90 with particular reference to the Forfar, Angus stretch. [2331]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Malcolm Chisholm): Road safety at the Glamis and Kirriemuir junctions on the A90 Forfar bypass is closely monitored on a regular basis. Additional signing has recently been approved and will be installed shortly.

Mr. Swinney: Will the Minister find time in his busy day to take the opportunity, as I did yesterday, to view five minutes of video footage from Tayside police showing some of the horrors that take place at those two junctions? There is an urgent need for a safety review and a medium-term strategy for a graded junction to be built, including an underpass. Will the Minister give a commitment that the Government will consider that as an early priority?

Mr. Chisholm: I will, of course, look at the video footage. I am concerned about the number of accidents that have occurred at the junctions in spite of numerous

accident investigations and prevention measures, including the new one to which I referred. I shall also look at the case for grade separation. Let me say more generally that safety will be a key criterion in the roads review to be announced later this week.

Government Spending

4. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on per capita government spending in Scotland. [2332]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Donald Dewar): Identifiable general government expenditure per head in Scotland was £4,614 in 1995-96, the last year for which complete figures are available.

Mrs. Winterton: Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that per capita expenditure in Scotland is 24.6 per cent. higher than in England? Bearing that in mind, why should the United Kingdom Parliament continue to vote extra funding for Scotland if Scotland has its own tax-raising powers? Will not the Assembly cost Scotland's people dear?

Mr. Dewar: No, I do not agree with the hon. Lady. If she is concerned about the way in which we organise our expenditure allocation in the United Kingdom, she will recognise that the system has been well established for many years under the previous Government, whom I think she supported. If she wants to get into an argument, no doubt she will wish to look at the health statistics, the population sparsity statistics and the economic deprivation statistics and recognise that the United Kingdom is a partnership in which we pool our resources and allocate them on an agreed basis.

Mr. Doran: Is my right hon. Friend aware of the serious problems affecting in particular the north-east of Scotland, due to drug abuse, which may merit much higher expenditure in Scotland? He may have seen press reports of the death of four people in Aberdeen in the past few days due to drug misuse and overdoses. When he considers public expenditure in Scotland, will he give a commitment that the fight against drugs will remain a high priority in the Government's programme?

Mr. Dewar: I share my hon. Friend's concerns, as I think will the whole House. That is the reason why we have given particular prominence to drug-related measures in the Scottish Office block, and why I and, to be fair, the leaders of other parties in the House support Scotland Against Drugs and give it our energetic and active help.

Mr. Wallace: Does the Secretary of State agree that the kind of question asked by the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton), and the thinking behind it, are among the reasons why there are no Scottish Conservative Members present today? Indeed, Opposition Front Benchers have such a tenuous hold that they have had to put in Prayers cards to keep their seats. Any party that truly believes in the United Kingdom would recognise that the principle of equalisation underpins the Union. Following last week's uncertainty about the future of the Barnett-Goschen formula, will the Secretary of State confirm that, as the partners of the Scottish Constitutional Convention agreed, the

"current formula for the calculation of government expenditure in Scotland will continue to be used as the basis for the allocation of Scotland's fair share of UK resources"?

Mr. Dewar: I say in passing to my hon. Friend—

Mr. Burns: Hon. Friend?

Mr. Dewar: There you are. All I was going to say was that the power of prayer is something that the main Opposition party will have to rely on very often in the months ahead. I suspect that a few Opposition Members are on their knees even at this moment.

On the points made by the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace), I should emphasise the well-established nature of the present arrangements—the block and formula system. The White Paper on devolution will set out the position very clearly, as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury made clear on 11 June, when he emphasised that the Government believe that the formula plays a very important part in the allocation of public expenditure.

Dr. Godman: Although these are early days—my right hon. Friend has been in office only six weeks—what progress has he made in targeting funding towards the national health service in Scotland and our education system? Those matters are of considerable importance to many of my constituents, particularly in the light of the long waiting lists at the local hospital that were the fault of what is now a largely rural English party.

Mr. Dewar: We are trying, where we can, to reorder priorities in a way of which I think my hon. Friend would approve. A number of early measures were taken within this year's budget that resulted in £13 million going to the education budget, particularly for literacy and other such problems, and £10 million being found to transfer to the health service budget, with a particular target of reducing specified areas of waiting lists in the NHS.

Local Government Finance

5. **Mr. Maude:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of Scottish local government revenue support in the current year. [2333]

Mr. Chisholm: The 1997–98 local government finance settlement set the level of non-housing revenue support at £5,256.7 million.

Mr. Maude: Will the Minister confirm that that estimate includes provision for a full inquiry into alleged corruption in Glasgow, Govan?

Mr. Chisholm: That is not the issue in that money. The people of Glasgow of course have the right to expect the highest standards of conduct, and that is precisely what they will get. We are looking forward to the Nolan committee's report on aspects of local government.

Mr. Gorrie: In the light of information that the Minister now has, do the Government want to continue to

support the spending plans that they inherited from the previous Government, as they said they would before the election, with regard to local government? He must be aware of the great concern among many people in Scottish local government that the money available for next year will not allow them to provide adequate services.

Mr. Chisholm: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that we made it clear during the election that we would keep within the levels of inherited expenditure for two years. Having made the promise, we shall deliver it. Of course, the settlement was tight and we realise that it will cause difficulties next year, but we made the promise and we shall carry it through.

Skye Bridge Tolls

6. **Mr. Charles Kennedy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his discussions with the Highland council in respect of the Skye bridge tolls. [2334]

Mr. Dewar: I am meeting senior members of the Highland council to discuss the Skye bridge on 23 June.

Mr. Kennedy: Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to clarify the perhaps unfortunate impression given by the Minister with responsibility for transport in a television interview in Scotland last week when he was asked about the Labour party commitment that the discussions next week will take place against the backdrop of the unambiguous Labour party commitment—given locally during the election and nationally by the Minister—that it would work with the Highland council on a strategy for the abolition of the tolls? Will the Secretary of State confirm that that remains the context in which the discussions will take place? Does he agree that the atmosphere of those discussions would be assisted immeasurably locally if the Lord Advocate were to take early action to suspend, if not terminate and announce a complete amnesty on, the criminal charges against all those currently before the sheriff court?

Mr. Dewar: I appreciate the importance of the issue in the highlands and I recognise that the hon. Gentleman has long campaigned on it. I also appreciate the pressures that he is under from his constituents. We shall approach the talks constructively, but he must recognise that we have inherited a contract and any improvement will cost money that must be found from the Scottish block and, specifically, from the roads budget. That is a difficulty for us. All I can say is that the review will be intended to produce improvements, if possible, and a way forward by agreement, if that is possible. As for the hon. Gentleman's point about prosecution policy, the best way to solve that is for people not to break the law.

Mr. Salmond: On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I take points of order after questions.

Mr. Salmond: On this question.

Madam Speaker: No. I have dealt with this issue before and the point of order must come after questions.

Mr. Salmond: On this question.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is using up the time of other Members who have questions down and the right to put them.

Scottish Office Spending

7. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement about the implications of the forthcoming public expenditure survey for Scottish Office spending. *[Interruption.]* [2335]

Madam Speaker: Order. Question 7 has been called.

Mr. Dewar: My apologies, Madam Speaker. I was distracted by certain happenings, but I am sure that that was unintentional.

There will be no public expenditure survey in 1997, but I shall carry out an internal review of the plans for 1998–99.

Mr. Forth: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his post and I remind him that the last time we faced each other in a debating chamber was during my maiden speech in the Glasgow university union in 1962. I have waited a long time to face him again, but I welcome the opportunity. In his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton), he said that the existing imbalance in per capita expenditure between Scotland and England was a system that has been "well established". Does he accept that his devolution proposals could or should change that? Does he accept that a Scottish Assembly should use its discretion to raise taxes to justify and to pay for any imbalance between Scottish public expenditure and its level in the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Dewar: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman remembers Glasgow and that the memories have not been obliterated by his pleasure at being in Bromley and Chislehurst—a pleasure which, I suspect, was acute on 1 May. If he considers his Glasgow memories, he will understand some of the reasons for the differential to which he refers. It is not the intention that revenue-varying powers for a Scottish Parliament are meant, in some way, to compensate for a punitive raid on Scottish finances. I regard that as a perverse and eccentric view.

Mr. Welsh: Why are the Labour Government continuing the Tory Government's policy of self-financing public sector pay awards which can only be funded by service cuts or rising unemployment, which affects both the private sector and local authorities? Why is Labour supporting the fourth and fifth consecutive years of that destructive Tory policy?

Mr. Dewar: We have made clear what our spending limits mean and we shall stay within the announced limits. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support that.

Mr. Maclennan: If there is to be no increase in expenditure on roads in Scotland during the next two years, will the Secretary of State at least consider a reordering of priorities to enable the north coast road of Great Britain to become a proper two-lane road and to improve the A9 north of Helmsdale into Caithness, as those roads are well below standard and ought to be beneficiaries of a reordered programme for Scotland?

Mr. Dewar: I have on several occasions driven those roads—sometimes to visit the hon. Gentleman—so I understand his point, and no doubt those carrying out the review of the roads programme will bear that in mind.

Mr. Alan Clark: Since the Secretary of State's hon. Friend the Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson)—a real friend this time—would not tell *The Herald* yesterday the cost of putting a Hyundai factory in Fife, will he confirm here to the House of Commons that it will cost the taxpayer £120,000 per job?

Mr. Dewar: I often read what the right hon. Gentleman writes and I have come to the conclusion that I can class it largely as fiction. That figure is not accurate. I hope that he will support the efforts of Locate in Scotland—as well as the efforts of the present and previous Governments—to attract investment to this country.

NHS Trusts (Borders)

8. **Mr. Moore:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to meet with the chairmen of the NHS trusts in the borders to discuss the state of the trusts' finances. [2336]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Sam Galbraith): I have not been approached by the chairmen of the trusts in the borders for such a meeting. However, arrangements are in hand to meet a representative group of trust chairmen in Scotland when a range of issues will be discussed.

Mr. Moore: I hope that the Minister will include representatives from the borders in that group. What steps will he take to end the current uncertainty at the two trusts in the borders as a result of their short-term contracts for the current financial year? In particular, what assurance can he give that the anticipated shortfall of £750,000 at the Borders general hospital will not lead to cuts in patient care?

Mr. Galbraith: The current shortfall is a result of a revaluation of assets and a requirement to pay a 6 per cent. return on capital. That is a matter to be negotiated between the trusts and the health board, and I look forward to a successful conclusion to the discussions.

Mr. Davidson: When the Minister next meets chairmen of health boards, will he mention to many of them that their services are no longer required? Does he remember that many of the chairs of health boards—like their members—are simply Tory placemen who ought to be got rid of by a Labour Government?

Mr. Galbraith: I am currently considering the question of who will chair the health boards and I hope to make an announcement very soon.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: As the hon. Gentleman cannot even get an assurance from the Chief Secretary on the future of the Barnett formula, what assurances can he give to the chairmen of health trusts in Scotland?

Mr. Galbraith: Expenditure on the health service in Scotland is well laid out in our plans, and that will continue. The funding of the health service in Scotland is well known and secure.

Health Boards (Funding)

9. **Mr. Donohoe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he next expects to discuss financial provision with the chairmen of the health boards. [2337]

Mr. Galbraith: I held the first of my regular meetings with health board chairmen on 6 June 1997.

Mr. Donohoe: Given the commitment by the Labour party in the manifesto to do away with the crazy internal market—and, specifically, given the proposal to halve the number of health board trusts in Scotland—can the Minister tell us whether the two acute trusts in Ayrshire will be axed?

Mr. Galbraith: We have already begun to dismantle the internal market; detailed plans will be set out in a White Paper. We are also considering the merging and reconfiguration of trusts and we are asking boards and trusts for their views. There will be full consultation. Of course the trusts to which my hon. Friend refers will be given consideration.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: As the Minister knows, there are several proposals in various parts of Scotland, not least in Fife, for the amalgamation of national health service trusts. Will he assure the House that the single criterion to be applied before any trusts are allowed to amalgamate will be the enhancement of patient care?

Mr. Galbraith: I can most certainly give the hon. and learned Gentleman that assurance. The main reason for amalgamation will be to improve care for patients in the area. When we have drawn up our plans, they will go out to full consultation before any final decision is made.

Mrs. Fyfe: Has my hon. Friend noticed that Health Care International has applied to have its bed complement reduced from 86 to 50? Remembering the gross waste of taxpayers' money under the previous Government on an unworkable hospital, will he make a statement about the action taken by the Labour Government, after decades of waiting, to get a first-class, up-to-date maternity unit built at the royal infirmary?

Mr. Galbraith: I was pleased to announce yesterday that we have been able to find £31 million of public capital to build the new maternity unit at the Glasgow royal infirmary. I was concerned that the private finance initiative process was delaying the project. The new unit is essential, as Rottenrow, which has served us well for many years, has become out of date. I am extremely pleased that we can now move forward.

Dr. Fox: Health chairmen will understand that money cannot be spent on health without first being raised. The Chief Secretary has refused to rule out prescription charges for some pensioners in England and Wales; will the Minister rule them out in Scotland?

Mr. Galbraith: Our comprehensive spending review is for the medium and long term. Its purpose is to ensure that all public moneys are best used to fulfil our manifesto commitments. As we set out in our manifesto, there is no question of the Government doing anything to breach the

fundamental principle of the NHS: that health care will be available to all according to need and free at the point of use.

NHS Trusts (Management Efficiency)

10. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to improve the management efficiency of NHS trusts. [2338]

Mr. Galbraith: The Government are determined to make progress in reducing the costs of managing the national health service. We have made clear our intention to replace the internal market. The details of our proposals will be contained in a White Paper to be published in the autumn. In the meantime, we have already taken action to release £10 million of savings in bureaucracy to reduce waiting lists and deal with emergency admissions, particularly in the winter months.

Mr. Ross: I congratulate my hon. Friend on moving so quickly to meet some of Labour's manifesto commitments. What efforts has he made to halt the creeping privatisation of clinical services in the national health service in Scotland?

Mr. Galbraith: The most important thing to say is that there will never, never be a repeat of the Stonehaven process under this Government. Clinical services will never again go out to the private finance initiative.

Mr. Ian Bruce: The Government are trying to save £100 million in the health service by cutting managers and clerical workers. How many will have to be sacked to achieve that saving?

Mr. Galbraith: The hon. Gentleman is talking about the NHS throughout the United Kingdom; the equivalent figure for Scotland, for which I have responsibility, is £10 million. We have already made it clear that if there are to be any job losses we hope that they will happen through natural wastage, voluntary redundancy or early retirement.

Mr. David Marshall: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his splendid announcement yesterday about the financing of the new maternity unit at Glasgow royal infirmary, which brings to an end 18 years of wrangling and inefficiency. Does he realise how welcome it is to people in the east end of Glasgow? How soon does he expect construction work to commence and how long will it take to complete the unit?

Mr. Galbraith: I want, first, to recognise the considerable effort that my hon. Friend has put into the project, fighting for his constituents in the east end of Glasgow. That is why I was especially happy to make the announcement. I hope that work will start extremely soon. The first patients will be admitted in 2000 and I hope to open the unit then.

Economic Development

11. **Mr. Salmond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he will next meet Scottish Enterprise to discuss measures to encourage economic development. [2339]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend and I intend to have regular contact with Scottish Enterprise. We met members of the Scottish Enterprise board on 6 June at the local enterprise company board members conference in Dundee. Yesterday, I had a very useful session with the chief executive and senior management team of Scottish Enterprise in Glasgow.

Mr. Salmond: At such meetings, will the Minister discuss the impact on economic development around the coastline of Scotland if the capacity reductions in the fishing industry fall on the Scottish fishing fleet as opposed to the flags of convenience fleet? Does the Minister accept that the proposed deal emerging from the intergovernmental conference falls far short of what is required to deal with the flags of convenience problem and of the Prime Minister's commitments to the Scottish Fishermen's Federation before the election? What was the Scottish Office input into the IGC relating to flags of convenience? What is the Scottish Office position on the matter?

Mr. Wilson: I imagine that when we discuss fishery matters with Scottish Enterprise, the acting chairman in particular will be well informed on them. As far as present negotiations are concerned, we should wait and see whether anything comes out of the IGC. I assure the hon. Gentleman that my colleague the Minister with responsibility for fisheries has been deeply involved in the discussions.

Mr. Eric Clarke: May I ask my hon. Friend about future investment in Monktonhall colliery in my constituency? The men invested £10,000 of their money to keep the colliery open. The Coal Authority has now put it into care and maintenance. I thank my hon. Friend and his Department, as well as the Minister at the Department of Trade and Industry, for their efforts, but the colliery is reaching its 11th hour. Has anyone come along and agreed to keep it open? Three hundred and twenty jobs are at stake in my constituency and the constituencies of other hon. Members in the area and it would be a great loss if Monktonhall colliery were to close.

Mr. Wilson: I share the sentiments that my hon. Friend expressed. As he was good enough to recognise, we have put a lot of work into the matter during the past few weeks. As he knows, I have had a couple of meetings with him and representatives of the National Union of Mineworkers. We managed to extend the deadline for the switching off of the pumps. The situation is very regrettable. A great deal of investment went into Monktonhall and the flooding has clearly come as a devastating blow to the people who work there. My hon. Friend said that we are at the 11th hour—we are well into it. The problem is that in spite of the efforts that we initiated as a result of our meeting with him—to scan the world looking for

anyone who was interested in taking over or investing in Monktonhall—we have had no response. There remains only one interested party. I met that party last Friday. There are real problems with the financing arrangements that he is able to produce, as my hon. Friend knows. In all seriousness, we must make progress soon if this saga is to have anything less than a sad conclusion. It is costing £100,000 a week to keep the pumps going. A case can be made for that if there is a serious expression of interest, but if one looks around the world and finds no one who is interested, obviously a conclusion has to be reached at some point.

Roads Programme

12. **Mr. Alasdair Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to review the present proposals to upgrade the A75 and A76 roads. [2340]

Mr. Chisholm: I shall announce in the near future our plans for fulfilling our manifesto commitment to a strategic review of the Scottish trunk roads programme as a whole. The A75 and A76 roads will be considered within that context.

Mr. Morgan: Does the Minister realise how disappointed my constituents will be with that reply, both on the ground of road safety—there have already been several serious accidents on both roads this year—and on economic grounds because of the poor transport infrastructure in Galloway? Does he also realise that the Government's commitment to dual the A55 in Anglesey, which the Under–Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) reaffirmed last week, will drag transport away from the Stranraer-Larne route and will cause further redundancies in Stranraer and Northern Ireland unless roads are also built in Galloway?

Mr. Chisholm: As I have said, safety will be a key criterion in the roads review that we will announce later this week. There is a route action plan for the A76 and one to examine the entire length of the A75 is planned. Finally and perhaps most important, a £10 million scheme for the area known as the Glen, which lies immediately to the west of Dumfries, will start in spring 1998.

Public Expenditure

13. **Mr. Fallon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the Barnett formula will continue to operate for the allocation of public expenditure in Scotland. [2341]

Mr. Dewar: The Barnett formula is well established, giving stability and certainty to Scottish Office expenditure plans. The White Paper on devolution will set out the position clearly and, as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury made clear in the House on 11 June, the Government believe that the formula plays a very important part in the allocation of public expenditure.

Mr. Fallon: Will the Secretary of State confirm that if the new Scottish Parliament voted to lower taxes, it would, perversely, increase the proportion of expenditure in Scotland paid for by non-Scottish taxpayers? Does he really suggest that the Barnett formula can continue unamended?

Mr. Dewar: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's argument. There will clearly be an extensive debate on the matter after publication of the White Paper. I welcome that, because I believe that the case is very strong. A good system will be in the White Paper and I hope that it will command support both north and south of the border.

Constituency Sizes

14. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the average number of voters in a Scottish constituency. [2342]

Mr. McLeish: The average size of the parliamentary electorate in Scottish constituencies, based on the 1997 electoral register, is 55,339.

Mr. Winterton: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. I represent an English constituency with about 72,000 electors. Does he believe that such inequality between the sizes of constituencies in Scotland and England can remain? As a matter of urgency, will he ask the boundary commission to start its work in Scotland to bring the size of Scottish constituencies into line with that of those in other parts of the United Kingdom?

Mr. McLeish: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's comments. Scotland's entitlement to not less than 71 seats has been in place since 1948 and successive Governments of all persuasions have endorsed the provision currently contained in schedule 2 to the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986. There has never been an equivalent provision for England.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Summer Adjournments

29. **Mr. Winnick:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on her plans for the summer Adjournments. [2314]

32. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the President of the Council what plans she has to reduce the length of the summer Adjournment and to ensure that periodic Adjournments introduced coincide with school holidays. [2317]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): I am in favour of our periodic Adjournments, including the summer Adjournment, coinciding with school holidays whenever possible. I regret that I am not yet in a position to give an indication of the Government's intention with respect to this year's summer Adjournment, but I am mindful of hon. Members' views and of the representations that have been made. In general terms, the arrangement for the summer and other Adjournments is one aspect of our working practices that the new Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons may wish to consider.

Mr. Winnick: I appreciate my right hon. Friend's answer. Is it appropriate for the House not to sit for three

continuous months? While, for Labour Members at least, it is not one long holiday, it seems a long period for Parliament to be in abeyance. Does she accept that many people find it strange that while we continue to sit until late at night, despite what happened in the last Parliament, we shut up shop for three months? Is it really necessary?

Mrs. Taylor: I can give my hon. Friend no assurance that the summer recess will be the three months that he suggests. The House will agree that recesses are not holidays for Members of Parliament. I think that further progress could be made on the structure of the parliamentary year, but the modernisation Committee may wish to consider that.

Mr. Gapes: I welcome my right hon. Friend's remarks about trying as far as possible to ensure that recess dates correspond with school holidays. School holidays are different in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England and Wales. To be fair to all hon. Members, it would be better to reduce the length of the summer recess to provide hon. Members who have children with the opportunity to see our families. This should be a family-friendly Parliament.

Mrs. Taylor: I am sympathetic to my hon. Friend's point and fully aware of the difficulties of getting recess dates that coincide with holidays in all the different parts of the country. It is impossible to guarantee that hon. Members will always be in recess during school holidays, but I think that more could be done to ensure that the two coincide.

Mr. Tyler: Does the President accept that the summer recess will provide the first and best opportunity for us to rationalise the seating in the Chamber? At present there are absurd anomalies, not just relating to the large number on the Government Benches. Is this not the first and best opportunity for us to bring in the carpenters and electricians?

Should not anomalies such as we witnessed this afternoon, when Conservative spokesmen found it necessary to put Prayers cards on their Front Bench to try to establish some right to speak on behalf of Scotland, also be addressed as a matter of urgency?

Mrs. Taylor: I will not comment on who put down Prayers cards first in any particular row in the Chamber. As for the work that could be done in the summer recess, I do not think that it would be possible for the House to arrive at any conclusions about alterations, even if alterations were thought possible. We are a long way from any consensus that the shape of the Chamber should be changed.

Mr. MacKay: Will the right hon. Lady confirm that, owing to the Government's delay in introducing the Budget and the consequent Finance Bill—apparently because of fears of litigation over the windfall tax—the current parliamentary term will extend further into the school holidays than would have been necessary if the Government had only been competent?

Mrs. Taylor: Labour Members will take no lectures from Opposition Members about competence or, indeed, business management.

Child Care

30. **Mrs. Clwyd:** To ask the right hon. Member representing the House of Commons Commission if she will make a statement on child care arrangements for Members and staff in the House. [2315]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: On this occasion—although it will not be the normal practice at subsequent Question Times—I am answering for the House of Commons Commission.

A scheme exists for staff employed by the Commission. Participants receive child care vouchers. The scheme caters for children under five and vouchers may be exchanged for a range of child care facilities. No arrangements are made by the House for the children of Members.

Mrs. Clwyd: I am grateful for that answer, but question what my right hon. Friend said about child care vouchers. Welcome though they are, they have been at the same level for several years—£6 a day—and I believe that that ought to be increased.

More than 5,000 people work in the Houses of Parliament. Is it not time that child care facilities were provided? In any comparable organisation, they would be. It has taken us 13 years to get a unisex hairdresser in the House; surely it is not going to take as long as that to secure very necessary child care facilities.

Mrs. Taylor: We should all be aware of the need for good child care facilities for all parents. Many people would say that child care facilities in the House might not be the best option for a number of people who work in the Palace. The matter has been considered by Committees of the House in the past, and it may be considered by them in the future.

31. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the President of the Council what representations she has received regarding the provision of a creche and child care allowances for hon. Members and their staff; and if she will make a statement. [2316]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I have received two letters, one signed by several Members, about the possibility of establishing a creche. During the last Parliament, the Administration Committee considered the need for a scheme for Members, and concluded at that stage that there was little demand for it. Clearly the Committee could consider the matter again, although I think it right to remind my hon. Friend that, as each Member has his or her individual working pattern and family arrangements, it is difficult to see one simple solution to the problem.

Mr. Barnes: Is my right hon. Friend aware that things have changed in the House? Hon. Members seem to be getting younger and younger—that even applies to party leaders. Because of that, there is presumably more interest in creche and nursery facilities, as well as that felt by the 5,000 people mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Mrs. Clwyd). Today, a parliamentary child care group was established by trade unionists and others in the House. May I press my right hon. Friend to say that the surveys that have been conducted in the past

should now be extended to take account of the entirely new circumstances, and to establish the demand that exists so that it can be met?

Mrs. Taylor: It is highly possible that the Committees, once they are established, will want to reconsider the situation in view of the opinions of the House as it is now constituted. I agree with my hon. Friend that there are more younger Members and that there may be more interest in creche facilities. I should point out, however, that many Members who are not London based would not be interested in using a creche for their children.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: If arrangements are made in due course for creche and other facilities in the House, will the right hon. Lady ensure that the costs do not fall upon the taxpayer but entirely upon those who use such facilities?

Mrs. Taylor: The cost of such facilities, were they to be provided within the House, would be a significant factor. As for our responsibilities as the Commission, the child care vouchers that are provided to staff are paid for by the House. I have no plans to introduce subsidies to hon. Members for child care facilities.

Public Access

33. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the right hon. Member representing the House of Commons Commission what proposals the Commission has for improving public access to the Palace of Westminster. [2318]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Commission remains committed to making the Palace of Westminster accessible to people with disabilities. Since 1995, in excess of £1 million has been spent in implementing the conclusions of the Administration Committee's review of access for disabled people. I will arrange for a list of the recent improvements that have been undertaken to be published in the *Official Report*.

Mr. Corbyn: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for making that list available to hon. Members and the public. Does she accept, however, that throughout the previous Parliament, and several before that, constant concern was expressed about the difficulties of access by the public to this building, particularly through St. Stephen's entrance, because the large number of steps there mean that wheelchair users have to come into the House through a back route? Will she make it a priority to ensure that all visitors to the building are able to enter it in exactly the same way so that they do not feel a sense of discrimination and exclusion? If we are able to provide proper access facilities when the House is lobbied by disability organisations, we should be able to provide them every day.

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend will be aware that there are particular difficulties associated with the St. Stephen's entrance and that several feasibility studies have been undertaken to see what could be done, but those difficulties are quite severe. Progress has been made in a number of areas and I know that the Serjeant at Arms is having further consultations with those involved and is now conducting trials to see what improvements could be made for people with disabilities and others who wish to enter the House of Commons.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: The progressive steps that have been taken, which have certainly made life much easier for those with disabilities, are welcome. Further efforts would be supported to overcome some of the remaining challenges, which are great. Could the Commission consider another unsatisfactory situation—the queues of people outside the Palace who wait for hours, often in the rain, with the uncertain prospect of coming into the House? They have no opportunity either to watch the proceedings in the House on television or to listen to them. I am aware that there may not be a short-term answer, but could the right hon. Lady give some consideration to that problem?

Mrs. Taylor: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks about the progress that has been made so far to improve access for people with disabilities. As for the queues we see outside, there is a problem because those people often do not know how long they may have to wait. They are sometimes of the opinion that the queue ends as soon as they get inside the door at St. Stephen's, but we know that that is not the case. I will consider the point that the hon. Gentleman has made, but I cannot instantly see any easy solution.

Following is the information:

Of particular importance have been the provision of ramps in Star Chamber Court, at the Medals Corridor and at Speaker's House, as well as the installation of platform lifts giving access to the Grand Committee Room and to the disabled lavatory off the Upper Committee Corridor. It is intended to install a lift to the Grand Committee Room as part of the planned redevelopment of the Westminster Hall Cafeteria area, to include a visitor centre, after the new Portcullis House is occupied. This redevelopment will also allow ramped access to the interview rooms off Westminster Hall which are the only public areas not currently accessible to wheelchair users.

Recent improvements to the arrangements for access by the public to the Line of Route have been the provision of a tactile model of the Palace of Westminster in the Robing Room so that people with visual impairments can gain an understanding of the building. A change in the queuing arrangements at Sovereign's Entrance means that it is now possible for a large number of people to wait in shelter until their tour starts.

Taking of the Oath

34. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the President of the Council if she will review the arrangements relating to the taking of the oath by hon. Members. [2319]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I have no plans to do so.

Mr. Cohen: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the oath needs to be reconsidered because it has nothing to do either with allegiance to the country or to democratic government? The oath seems feudal and to smack of freemasonry. My right hon. Friend will recall that the Tolpuddle martyrs got deported for taking an oath. I am keeping my fingers crossed that my right hon. Friend will agree to review the taking of the oath.

Mrs. Taylor: On this occasion, I cannot agree with my hon. Friend. There may be things we could do to speed

up the process. Changes were made on the last occasion when Members took the oath, following recommendations from the Procedure Committee. Further improvements might be possible, but I do not accept the basic idea behind my hon. Friend's question: that we should either abolish or change significantly the oath itself.

Smoking Policy

35. **Mrs. Anne Campbell:** To ask the right hon. Member representing the House of Commons Commission what plans she has to implement a smoking policy for staff working areas. [2320]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Commission's policy on smoking for its staff is that individual heads of Department make arrangements by mutual agreement with their staff. The Board of Management is presently carrying out a review of that policy at the specific request of the House of Commons Commission. A policy on smoking in offices of hon. Members and their staff is primarily a matter for the Administration Committee.

Mrs. Campbell: I welcome the review. Does my right hon. Friend regard it as unsatisfactory that the House of Commons and the associated office buildings are some of the few public buildings in which smoking is still permitted in libraries, corridors and reception areas, and that it is permitted even in the Division Lobbies? Will she try to ensure that the review is speeded up and that we get a smoking policy that applies to the whole of this building and to the offices she mentioned?

Mrs. Taylor: I have a great deal of sympathy with my hon. Friend's point. Although the Committees of the House have looked at this matter in the past, the fact that we have a new Parliament with new Members may mean that this is an opportune time to revisit the issue. Many hon. Members will have a great deal of sympathy with her point of view.

Points of Order

3.30 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Earlier today, on Question 7, you allowed the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) to ask a question from the Dispatch Box. I understand that there is currently an element of confusion in the Tory party and I know that the right hon. Member might be suffering an identity crisis as to whether he is a Front or Back Bencher—perhaps his prospects depend on the outcome of the leadership contest. However, I do not think that there are any recent precedents—there may be some longer-standing ones—for a question such as that being put from the Dispatch Box. I do not think that it is a good practice, and I hope that you will not allow it in future.

Madam Speaker: There are many recent precedents for such an occurrence. I watched very carefully today. I am given the names of those on the Front Bench who are currently responsible for Question Time—there were four Members on the Front Bench and they were entitled to four questions, including the one asked by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), but they took only three. I have no complaints and I do not think that the House could have either.

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will have heard the Secretary of State for Scotland, in replying to my supplementary question to Question 7, stigmatise an assertion that I made as being fiction. I accept that that was a slip of the tongue, because we all accept that in this House we do not accuse each other of lying, but can it be put on the record that he said that the item in *The Herald*, which asserted that the cost of a job at the Hyundai factory in Fife would be £120,000, was a lie?

Madam Speaker: Ministers are responsible to themselves for the comments that they make, but I doubt whether the right hon. Gentleman actually used those words. I tend to listen very carefully to what is said in such heated exchanges.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Some time ago, the Labour party issued rules of conduct to its Back Benchers on how they should conduct themselves in this House. It struck me that those rules actually stopped them from holding their own executive to account if it seemed that they were being critical of the Government. I saw you looking round for Labour Members standing during questions about expenditure on Scottish matters, so you will have noticed that no Labour Member stood on those questions. Will you look at those rules of conduct and perhaps send them to the Nolan committee, and so make sure that the Labour Whips have not gagged all Labour Members?

Madam Speaker: Those are party political matters in which I certainly have no intention of intervening, whether they involve the Labour party or any other party in the House. I have been in this Chair for just over five years now, and there were times when a previous Government had no Members of their own party standing and I was at a loss in terms of calling Members to speak. It is quid pro quo.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(4) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

BENEFITS

That the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit (General) Amendment Regulations 1997 (S.I., 1997, No. 852) be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.—*[Mr. Graham Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

3.34 pm

The Minister of State, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

In our manifesto, we stated our long-held commitment to help meet housing need by building new houses and rehabilitating old ones, through the phased release of capital receipts from council house sales. We shall now honour that commitment.

There is a good reason why we made that commitment. Since 1979, more than £22 billion has been raised from sales of council housing, a policy which has enabled many people to realise their dream of owning their own home. But where did the money go? How did the Government use that extremely valuable asset? Very little of it went back into housing. Now we want to make sure that some of the money is put back into housing, so that tenants and homeless families can know that they, too, may benefit from the opportunities that a decent home brings.

This Government were elected on a promise to govern for the many, not just for the few. We shall not forget those who were left behind by an Administration who lacked a housing policy and ensured that many of those folk simply never had a chance.

The need to spend more on housing is clear. During the previous Parliament, there were successive cuts to housing capital programmes. Local authorities in particular have suffered as allocations under the housing investment programme, for investment in both public and private housing, have been cut from more than £1.7 billion in 1991-92 to less than £900 million this year.

Those cuts to local authority resources have had a major effect on council housing stock. Tenants have to live in properties that often lack adequate kitchens and bathrooms; doors, windows and roofs are not being replaced until long after they have reached the end of their useful lives. Local authorities have to patch and mend instead of undertaking long-lasting repairs and improvements.

That is a waste of scarce resources. Last year, local authorities estimated that the backlog of work needed to bring the stock up to a reasonable state of repair was £20 billion. Obviously, that is a local authority estimate, not ours, and it needs to be treated with some caution. But none of us can deny that the decline in resources over a number of years has resulted in the deterioration of much local authority housing stock.

Mr. William O'Brien (Normanton): What my hon. Friend is saying about the provision of new housing and improvements to old housing in local authority stock is most welcome. Will she also bear in mind the question of rents? Under the Tory Government, private housing and housing associations had to ratchet up rents in line with the Government's philosophy. What we want is affordable local authority housing. I am sure that my hon. Friend will facilitate that; will she give local authorities the right to provide affordable houses for their tenants?

Ms Armstrong: That is one of the several real difficulties that the former Administration left us, but I can assure my hon. Friend that we shall bear it in mind, and that this initiative—contrary to the claims of some Conservative Members—will not lead to the raising of rents. *[Interruption.]* Madam Speaker, you have taught me that I must not respond to sedentary interventions.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Ms Armstrong: I give way to the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry).

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Will the hon. Lady extrapolate her remarks to council tax?

Ms Armstrong: I am happy to do so. There will be no effect on council tax because, as I shall explain, the supplementary credit approval route enables us to ensure that we account for the additional capital spending in the usual way. Housing-related spending will be accounted for through the housing revenue account, and non-housing spending will be accounted for through the capital element in the standard spending assessment; so there will be no effect on council tax or on rents.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): I do not follow that, because it seems to me that a large amount of that £22 billion is on deposit, earning interest. If the capital is spent, that interest is no longer available to the council and so will have to be made up by council tax payers. Will the Minister explain why that is not so?

Ms Armstrong: It will help the hon. Gentleman if he listens to my speech. If, at the end, he has not understood, I shall give way to him again. The matter will be explained; I accept that it is complex.

Not only local authority housing programmes have been cut. The Housing Corporation approved development programme, which is the main means by which social housing has been provided in recent years—new social housing, at least—was £1.6 billion in 1992 and well over £2 billion the following year, but it will be down to £560 million by the end of the century. That has severely affected new provision.

Last month, I announced plans to change the criteria according to which local authorities draw up their housing allocation schemes, to ensure that reasonable preference is given to the needs of households owed a homelessness duty, but improving the safety net for homeless families addresses only the symptoms of the problem, not its causes. In many parts of the country, one of the underlying reasons for homelessness is simply the shortage of good-quality, affordable accommodation. Those problems need to be tackled and the Bill is the starting point for a capital receipts initiative that will begin to do so.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): On the subject of affordability, does the hon. Lady agree with Shelter's assessment that releasing capital receipts will increase rents by £6 a week?

Ms Armstrong: I have tried to suggest that this is a complex matter and that perhaps Opposition Members

should wait until they have begun to grasp a little better the way in which the initiative will work, but I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. As my speech progresses, he will understand why it is unnecessary for council house rents to increase and why we would not allow rents to increase by such an amount as a result of the Bill.

The Bill is not just about providing additional resources. Given the scale of the problems that we have inherited, it is vital that those funds are not wasted. We must ensure that the additional spending goes where it is needed most, that it works within the Government's housing policy and wider policy framework and—this is important—that spending is used economically, efficiently and effectively in support of those objects.

We also need to proceed at a pace that meets the demands of prudent financial management and recognises the capacity of the construction industry. That will mean phasing the release of additional spending over time. With my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, I shall consider the scale and pace of the additional spending that we shall provide under the initiative. An announcement will be made in the summer Budget about resources for 1997–98 and for 1998–99.

The complexities of the matter are encompassed in clause 1, which will enable us to honour our manifesto commitment. It relates to section 55(3) of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, which states that set-aside capital receipts cannot be taken into account when determining the amount of a credit approval. The Bill will remove that prohibition for supplementary credit approvals, enabling us to issue them in a way that takes account of set-aside receipts. We intend to issue supplementary credit approvals rather than release the set-aside receipts.

That is a far superior mechanism, because it will enable us to direct the significant resources available to the areas where need for investment in housing is greatest. It is fairer because it does not reward local authorities that have chosen to retain their receipts while penalising those that have used them to repay debt.

There appear to be some major misconceptions about local authority receipts and how supplementary credit approvals could be used to take set-aside receipts into account. I shall therefore explain that matter in more detail. It is clearly necessary to do so, given the interventions so far.

Under the capital finance rules, local authorities with outstanding debt are required to set aside 75 per cent. of receipts from council house sales and 50 per cent. of receipts from the sale of land and other assets. Exceptions to that rule have been made to encourage the sale of particular assets, but there has usually been a requirement to set aside part of the receipt. Amounts set aside are recorded in an authority's accounts as provision for credit liabilities, or PCLs. The sum set aside can be used to repay debt or to support capital expenditure when facilitated by a credit approval, or simply held as cash for investment.

Thus, two neighbouring authorities may have generated the same level of receipts over the past few years, but now have a very different so-called PCL balance, simply because one has paid off more debt or used the resources in lieu of borrowing. For example, Birmingham has set aside capital receipts of more than £100 million since 1990, but it now looks as if it has nothing because its PCL balance is zero. Enfield, on the other hand, has set aside £26 million in the same period, but has a PCL balance of £163 million.

Another complication—I am sorry about this—is that those balances are not necessarily an accurate reflection of the level of cash and investments held by an authority. Local authorities might not have money in the bank. Enfield, for example, has cash and investments of only £7 million, although its PCL balance is £163 million. We therefore propose to take into account the cumulative total of receipts set aside by each authority since 1990, not the actual levels set aside at any one time. That is fairer as it does not take into account individual authorities' perfectly proper variation in debt management practices. It is one reason for issuing supplementary credit approvals as a means of releasing set-aside receipts.

The second reason for using the supplementary credit approval route, however, concerns the distribution of receipts. Local authorities that have generated the most receipts over the past six years are not necessarily those with the greatest need. We therefore want to strike a balance between the cumulative total of receipts set aside by individual local authorities and the relative need of each local authority. Issuing supplementary credit approvals allows us to do that. We therefore propose that, when resources are distributed among individual local authorities, one third should be distributed according to the proportion of the total of eligible set-aside receipts and the remaining two thirds in accordance with assessed need. That will be further explained in the consultation paper that we shall issue shortly. We shall be interested to hear views on our proposals.

Let me clear up another misconception. The Bill is about additional money. We have always accepted that the release of capital receipts will increase public expenditure. We shall therefore need to phase spending carefully, to ensure that it meets our manifesto commitment to prudent economic management—another good reason for using supplementary credit approvals.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill will benefit not only the 4,700 families who are homeless and on housing waiting lists in my constituency, but the economy and employment opportunities by potentially creating 30,000 jobs nationally for every £1 billion spent in each of two years? As more than half of that cost could be recouped through tax and benefit savings over that period, does she agree that that is far more prudent than the economic mismanagement of the previous Government, who allowed housing investment to be slashed by more than half and housing benefit costs to quadruple?

Ms Armstrong: My hon. Friend comes to the House with much experience in housing matters, and she is right that this initiative enables us to tackle other priorities identified in our manifesto. The initiative also meets my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's golden rule that borrowing must be used for investment, as my hon. Friend said.

Mr. Curry: Will the hon. Lady help the House, via me, by providing further clarification? I want her to imagine that she has round her table representatives of three local authorities: one that is relatively rich in capital receipts, one that is not, such as Tower Hamlets or Hackney—I

[Mr. Curry]

appreciate the distinction between the categories of capital receipts—and a large-scale voluntary transfer authority, such as Bromley. When those representatives come along and ask her what they will get, how will the hon. Lady explain the allocation to each category and how it is calculated?

Ms Armstrong: I shall try to help the right hon. Gentleman, whom I welcome to the Chamber. I thought that he might be otherwise preoccupied.

I had not explained, because I thought that matters were getting too complex, that at this stage we are not taking LSVT receipts into account. Bromley will be treated like other local authorities, except that, because it has got rid of all its housing stock, it will not have the same level of need as elsewhere—*[Interruption.]* No, Bromley does not have the level of need that other authorities have, because it does not have its own stock to improve. There may well be some need, but not the level of need that will exist in other authorities. The position will also depend on a local authority's current debt level. If it is debt free, it will be able to spend receipts, as the right hon. Gentleman knows.

Mr. Curry: I do not want to be difficult, but the point is important. The hon. Lady emphasised that in some respects she would allocate according to need. She then said that because Bromley had transferred its housing stock, it would not have need as a local authority. However, the people of Bromley have their needs. How will she take account of that in her distribution of credit approvals?

Ms Armstrong: Bromley does not have the same level of need because it does not have housing stock to improve. We shall use the same indicators of need as the right hon. Gentleman's Administration used when assessing the housing investment programme. The same indicators of need that are currently used for other housing programmes will be used for this programme. We intend that two thirds of the money should be allocated according to need and one third according to historic receipts. We are, however, prepared to listen to representations about the balance. I hope that that answer has helped the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I have listened carefully to my hon. Friend talking about the way in which there will be a redistribution of the money available. Does she accept that one of the reasons why the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) and Tory Members are a little confused about need and think that the redistribution is complex is simply that they operated for so long on the basis of handing out money to authorities that, in many cases, did not need it? The right hon. Gentleman made a great error when he referred to three local authorities being round the table. He forgot to mention Westminster, which got it all.

Ms Armstrong: My hon. Friend tempts me down another route which, if he does not mind, I will not be driven down today.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Armstrong: No, because I am anxious to make progress. I have taken a lot of interventions and I know that many hon. Members want to make speeches.

I want to move on to how we see the money being spent. We do not see the initiative as simply delivering a long-standing promise to housing authorities. It is also an excellent means of attacking economic and social decline, although we expect to see a major impact on housing over the life of this Parliament. We shall consult local government associations and local authorities about how best to target resources where they are needed and how to ensure that additional spending supports housing and wider objectives.

I can outline the main principles now. Local authorities will have a key role to play. They are responsible for drawing up housing strategies that cover all the housing in their areas. I want to ensure that they integrate the additional spending into those housing strategies. That may mean planning to undertake long-delayed renovation work to their old stock where that is their local priority or it may mean working in partnership with registered social landlords to provide new homes. It may mean expanding their private sector renewal programme and giving new momentum to renewal area initiatives. It may mean supporting the transfer of local authority stock to registered social landlords where that is supported by the tenants. The key will be to ensure that the resources are targeted to meet areas of local concern and to achieve good value for money.

Sir Paul Beresford: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Armstrong: It would be very rude of me not to give way to a former Minister.

Sir Paul Beresford: I am delighted. As an ethnic minority immigrant and as the product of a comprehensive education system, I have not been able to follow the hon. Lady completely. Is she saying that local authorities selected by the Secretary of State will be able to borrow money through supplementary credit approvals, taking into account the set-aside capital receipts received since 1990, but not taking into account the receipts of neighbouring authorities? Will that apply both when local authorities hold capital receipts and when they have used them to repay debts?

I should like to ask a second question as this may be my only opportunity to do so. Will the Government pick up the revenue aspects of that scenario in its entirety?

Ms Armstrong: Yes to both questions. The hon. Gentleman has just about got there on his first question. The answer to his second question is yes. If he bears with me to the end of my speech, he will understand our proposals.

Sir Paul Beresford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Armstrong: No, because I need to move on.

It is a key lesson of recent years that housing investment cannot solve problems where it operates in isolation. Poorly conceived housing schemes, without regard to context, just store up further problems. If housing is seen as part of a wider framework of social support and economic development, the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. Without that approach, the individual parts can become worthless.

No organisation can have all the answers, and the right answer will vary from place to place. We need an approach based on partnership and pluralism, involving

central Government, local authorities, local communities, local businesses, voluntary agencies and private funders. We need local ideas and an understanding of local needs. The housing problems that I see in my constituency could not be more different from those that I see in London, but there are problems in both areas that need attention from local organisations.

The capital receipts initiative will release resources to allow us to make a start on the problems that we face. The reduction in capital spending on housing since 1990, which I mentioned earlier, has left a substantial hole which we have to start filling. Given the backlog of renovation work needed in local authority housing and the need for new social housing, there is no prospect of financing everything that needs doing from public funds. It is vital that every pound of public sector money is worked as hard as possible and that we find ways of mobilising private finance effectively.

There is a key role for registered social landlords. That includes established housing associations, with their strong recent track record of delivering cost-effective development with a combination of grant and private sector funding. It also includes the new local housing companies, which the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), did so much to promote and which offer a vehicle for the transfer of local authority stock.

I do not expect revolution. Revolutionary approaches to housing have almost always ended in tears. I spent much of my early years as a community worker dealing with some of those early mistakes. I want an evolution of the best elements of policy in recent years, operated in a way that is sensitive to local needs and to the needs and wishes of tenants. That means listening.

The key to success is partnership. I want each local authority to sit down with all its partners to work out how to make the best of what is available. That will involve promoting new developments with housing associations.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Armstrong: No, I am sorry. I have already taken too long.

We shall not take the approach of the previous Government, who tried to force all local authorities to privatise their stock, regardless of whether they wanted to. However, transfer to another social landlord remains an option. We shall not support transfers of stock if tenants do not want it or if it will never provide the good-quality homes that they deserve—that would be throwing good money after bad—but transfer can bring better housing conditions for tenants more quickly than any other route. A new landlord can make proper provision for the future, preventing the chronic under-investment that we have seen in the local authority sector in recent years.

The emphasis on partnership and working through others may in many cases result in the local authority taking a more strategic role. That is the key. Whatever is happening, the authority has the responsibility to take a strategic approach. I shall ask the Housing Corporation to develop its existing approach by working alongside local authorities so that its knowledge, expertise and proven ability to promote cost-effective development can be brought to bear on a wider range of problems, but the local authorities' expertise will also come into play.

The initiative is not just about housing. Housing plays an important role in the regeneration of deprived, rundown areas, so we want local authorities to be able to support housing-associated regeneration projects that will help to contribute to the establishment and maintenance of successful communities. We are also determined that the receipts initiative should complement our wider policy objectives—welfare to work and addressing social exclusion. We want to support schemes that provide training opportunities, help the unemployed and support financial independence.

The capital receipts initiative will provide extra leverage to address the needs of individuals and communities. We aim to carry out not just physical regeneration, although that is important, but social regeneration, helping to improve the social environment and to restore people's sense of identity and pride in their communities.

Housing regeneration schemes can include community facilities such as day centres for the elderly, recreation and child care facilities, anti-crime and vandalism measures, energy efficiency schemes and projects to landscape local eyesores. In short, they should improve the quality of life for local people and reinforce the value of housing improvements. We are therefore prepared to allow some 15 per cent. of housing capital receipts in each scheme to be devoted to non-housing projects, provided that those projects directly benefit local inhabitants.

How can we make sure that all that is achieved and that the money is put to good use and not wasted, as it was in some high-profile schemes in the past? We propose not simply to hand over the resources and leave people to get on with it, but to distribute supplementary credit approvals on the basis of one third according to historic receipts and the remaining two thirds in accordance with assessed needs. There will be more to it, however, especially in future years. We shall expect local authorities to monitor their expenditure carefully, so that they can confirm that the money is being well spent—they will receive help from Government officers, including the Audit Commission. If they cannot do so, their future allocations will be reduced.

We shall expect local authorities to set out exactly the improvements that they plan to achieve with the additional resources before they start work on them. They will be expected to demonstrate that the improvements represent good value for money and to show how wider policy objectives, nationally and locally, have been met. To do that, they will have to show how specific outputs enable them to meet the aims and objectives in their housing strategies.

For the current year and for 1998-99, we shall need to issue resources quickly to enable local authorities to plan expenditure sensibly. Thus, local authorities that have plans in place to meet their stated objectives will receive supplementary credit approvals, but we shall expect them to provide us with plans detailing programmes and outputs and we shall monitor them carefully to ensure that the money is used in accordance with those plans.

As the resources are additional to existing housing capital allocations, we shall expect them to be used for additional expenditure. In future years, past performance

[Ms Armstrong]

will be taken into account in the allocation of resources. There is no point in allocating extra resources if local authorities do not make good use of them. I expect all authorities to improve their performance and to achieve much more for the benefit of their tenants and residents.

Let me remind hon. Members why the Bill is so important. The money issued under the receipts initiative is in addition to current expenditure plans. We are making an important commitment to local authorities and we want to make sure that it makes a difference, not just in the short term. We want to achieve lasting change.

Before I conclude, let me say a few words about clause 2 of the Bill, which amends section 54(5) of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. The Secretary of State can direct that certain items of an authority's revenue expenditure be treated as capital expenditure, for example when an authority is faced with substantial redundancy costs that it cannot reasonably be expected to meet out of its revenue budget. Currently, the Secretary of State is obliged to impose a repayment period of no longer than seven years when issuing a credit approval to permit borrowing to finance capitalised expenditure. That means that authorities must make provision from revenue resources to repay loans in respect of capitalised expenditure in seven years or fewer. That is a tough requirement and replaces the usual arrangements, which allow repayment over a period in excess of 25 years.

It is right that Ministers should be able to regulate the rate of provision for repaying borrowing for non-capital items. Borrowing for revenue purposes should be seen as an exceptional practice. Giving additional credit approvals to make it possible is a significant concession. It may therefore be reasonable to insist that, in some cases, provision for repaying such borrowing is made at a faster rate than normal. The present obligation is simply too inflexible.

Sir Paul Beresford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Armstrong: No, I shall not.

The clause will therefore replace the obligation to specify a period for repayment with a discretion to do so, enabling Ministers to take better account of particular circumstances.

Sir Paul Beresford: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Ms Armstrong: I shall not give way, because I want to conclude.

Clause 1 is at the heart of the initiative, and I should remind hon. Members why it is so important. For too many years, social housing has been the poor relation, starved of investment while its assets were sold off. The results of that policy are clear. People are condemned to live in damp and unhealthy housing—a cost in personal terms and to the health service. People are living on estates that most of us would rather not visit—but the police frequently do. Vulnerable families are crowded into tiny flats where there is nowhere for the kids to do their homework. It is no wonder that they fail at school. People are excluded from a basic right: a decent home.

With the Bill, we shall start to reverse the years of decline. We shall enable local authorities, working in partnership with all housing providers and with tenants and residents, to put in place programmes to redress the problems. We cannot turn back the clock; we cannot change it all in a day; but we shall make a difference.

4.11 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): I welcome the Minister of State, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for North–West Durham (Ms Armstrong) to her post for her first full-scale performance. I had hoped that she would come in the guise of Salome and gradually remove the veils from the Bill. She has shown a few petticoats, but we need to find out a lot more if we are to get to the heart of the measure. Her speech consisted, as far as I could tell, of a quite remarkable transition from introduction to peroration, with almost nothing between the two. We should like a great deal more detail. We will clearly have to explore it in Committee—assuming that the Government, quite exceptionally, intend the Bill to go into Committee.

The Bill is not about capital receipts; it is about giving supplementary credit approvals. The words "capital receipts" are a smokescreen. The Bill is entirely about that nice gentleman at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions dishing out some more conventional borrowing approvals to local authorities.

I agree with the Minister that the area is complex. It is no doubt reminiscent of the Schleswig-Holstein question. I wish her luck in getting abreast of it. All I can say is that once one gets abreast of the question and no longer needs to follow it, one's understanding is difficult to sustain in the face of one's preoccupations.

There are three main components of provisions for credit liabilities. I know that if I do not use that phrase, I will get some retrospective disapprobation from those in the Chamber who are not hon. Members. The first component is the amount set aside from council house sales, the second is the amount set aside from other asset sales, and the third is the amount set aside annually from revenue, representing a fixed percentage of net indebtedness, which is why local authorities such as Birmingham end up with provision not purely from the local authority housing side.

It is worth recalling that the sale of council houses was the most successful privatisation of the entire period of the Tory Government. More than £20 billion was raised by a privatisation which Labour opposed root and branch, stage by stage and week by week. If the privatisation had not happened, we would not be having the debate today.

There is a case for mobilising capital receipts, but it should follow certain clear conditions. The first is that the Government must have the intellectual honesty to recognise that authorising additional borrowing will have financial consequences that will have to be reconciled with the Government's public expenditure commitments. The Government chose to lock themselves into the previous Government's expenditure framework for two years. Whether they were right or wrong to do so, we wish to ensure that they maintain a commitment that they have given repeatedly in the House and outside.

The second condition is that the additional money should be devoted to clearly defined purposes. The Minister of State went very wide in describing

the purposes to which additional money could be devoted and she implied that it could be spent on broader regeneration. We need to know exactly what will be allowed and what the procedures will be for monitoring the expenditure. By the Minister's admission, expenditure on certain schemes has had to be tightened up in the past and we wish to ensure that the conditions are tight from the start.

Sir Paul Beresford: Does my right hon. Friend agree that that point applies especially to clause 2? As it stands, and without the explanation that I sought from the Minister, it appears that an incompetent authority, such as Harlow, which consistently spends some 60 per cent. above its standard spending assessment, could tell the Secretary of State that it was spending over cap yet again and ask whether it could pick up a revenue cost and capitalise it. The local authority could say that it did not want to pay in seven years, but wanted the loan on the never-never. If it kept the capitalisation quiet, the House of Commons would not know, because there is no requirement to report it.

Mr. Curry: My hon. Friend has hit on a pertinent point. When we come to clause 2 in Committee, we will wish to explore such contingencies and possibilities. Whenever somebody tells me that a Bill is a technical measure, I get slightly suspicious about what lies behind it.

There is a good case for devoting the allocation of the credit approvals, which is what we are talking about, to the renovation of existing stock. New build should be done only in partnership with housing associations in order to lever in additional private sector resources. In other words, the money should be used as local authority housing action grant. That has a long-established pedigree and has worked well.

Local authorities should not be told that they can go back to building council houses, except in the case of certain specialist provision. I doubt whether they will, because the right to buy will be a disincentive, but I do not want them to be encouraged to do so.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the ending of mandatory grant by the previous Government caused major problems for areas that have low-value properties, residents with low incomes and much pre-1914 stock that is in need of major improvement? Does he agree that local authorities should be allowed to spend money on improving such houses, as my hon. Friend the Minister of State suggested, because if one house in a long terrace becomes derelict, it can destroy the whole terrace?

Mr. Curry: I was about to come to the third condition; the hon. Gentleman anticipated me. I have visited the houses in Burnley to which he refers. I was trying to get to Blackburn at the time, but I made an unannounced visit and was able to inspect them in all their glory. There is a good case for using some of the resources to help with private sector renovation. We will all increasingly have to depend on private sector accommodation. That is agreed across the political spectrum.

I have visited areas such as Bradford and seen the problems closely connected with the fate of the ethnic minority communities. We need to ensure that we can direct money effectively to renovation in those areas. The Labour party has not pledged to reverse the changes in renovation grant and, therefore, we have a common interest in trying to ensure that it is used effectively.

I was pleased to hear the Minister of State say that the resources could also be used to support transfers. Even if all the set-aside receipts were to be mobilised—as if it were available in old socks under the bed and could be poured out into the housing market—they would not match the resources that are required. We will have to mobilise private sector funding, and the best way to do that is by the transfer programme. That programme, which depends on the consent of the tenants—that is written down in the law—is a sensible way forward. I agree with that, but it must be done by consent. The new social landlords, for whom we legislated—the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) was involved in that—will be an effective way of doing so.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): Does the right hon. Gentleman realise that after the Tory Government came to power in 1979, housing benefit escalated from £3 billion to more than £13 billion and is one of the biggest crises in housing? The Tory Government's dogmatic pursuance of market rents and large-scale voluntary transfers caused the problem. He is now advocating that the present Government make that problem worse.

Mr. Curry: As the Government have just said that they intend to continue the policy, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will express his discontent in the proper quarters. If one wants to bring a significant amount of private sector funding into the housing market, one must do so on a basis of realistic rents. Otherwise, the housing associations will not be able to earn the revenues they need to support their activities. That is a plain matter of economic fact.

I do not believe that local authorities should get back into the business of building council houses. We are through that period, and I see local authorities as enabling authorities. It would be an extremely bad use of resources to revert to the previous system.

As far as the fiscal and financial consequences are concerned, many Labour Members have always seen the receipts as being kept in an old sock under the bed, hidden from public view and waiting for some beneficial time to come. They believe that the money is doing nothing, but that is not the case. It does work, in that it replaces borrowing, earns interest and reduces the need for local tax. Therefore, any increase in local taxation would count against the overall public spending programmes.

Mr. Cash: In terms of choice, is not there a great deal to be said for allowing local authorities to make their own decisions as to the extent to which they spend money? Furthermore, that does not apply merely to capping, but to the contents of the Bill. If local authorities had the opportunity to make up their own minds and council taxes thereby increased, would not councils get into difficulties?

Mr. Curry: My hon. Friend is entirely right, but the fact is that local authority expenditure is about

[Mr. Curry]

25 per cent. of public expenditure. Despite all the glorious words that may be uttered on this subject, I have yet to be persuaded that any Government are likely to say that they wish not to have a view on what constitutes the correct amount of public expenditure in that regard. My hon. Friend and I will have an opportunity to debate these matters soon when we see the next revenue support grant from the Government. We shall see to what extent they wish to honour their words in that regard.

When the Secretary of State was challenged by my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford–on–Avon (Mr. Maples), he accepted that the receipts generated interest which helped to defray interest on outstanding local government loans or helped to reduce council tax, and that if they were spent, council tax would go up. The right hon. Gentleman said:

"Those are the matters of concern that we are discussing with the Chancellor."

Because Labour keeps reverting to its manifesto, he went on:

"The constant concerns of Conservative Members are interest payments and money. We are concerned about jobs and houses, and that is the fundamental difference between us."

I credit him with the full quote.

Earlier, in answer to a question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), the Secretary of State had said:

"Clearly, the use of those receipts will lead to an increase in public expenditure"—

the Minister of State has accepted that—

"and we shall have close discussions with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on that matter."—[*Official Report*, 3 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 171-72.]

Rather him than me. Clearly, that will be a very entertaining session, but the matter cannot be swept away like that—although it is very easy to do so. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has his public expenditure forecasts and he has a Labour party manifesto commitment which says:

"For the next 2 years Labour will work within the departmental ceilings for spending already announced."

That is the key. If public expenditure is to increase and it is to come off the Department's slate, where will the compensatory savings be made within the Department?

It may be right to increase public expenditure—Ministers would argue that it is necessary—but the House has a right to know how that is to be reconciled with the departmental and Government expenditure plans, especially as the Government are so anxious to show the hair on their chest in the matter of fiscal austerity .

Mr. Pickles: Surely it goes further than that, and Shelter is right to suggest that without substantial subsidies, which Labour Members have said they oppose, rents will rise by £6 a week.

Mr. Curry: I was most interested in the calculations made by Shelter and the Chartered Institute of Housing, and we shall have to explore those issues extremely closely, because mobilising money will have consequences.

Are the new borrowing permissions to be added to the public sector borrowing requirement? Do they affect departmental cash limits? Labour has made a rigid commitment on cash limits. Will the Government tolerate an increase in PSBR or pretend that it does not matter? If it is real public expenditure, and departmental totals are fixed, where will the compensating cuts be made?

Labour Members have constantly spoken of mobilising capital receipts, as though they were some sort of financial Home Guard to be called out in cases of emergency. In fact, the legislation mobilises absolutely nothing. It does not allow local authorities to spend their receipts; that is the last thing that it does. It does not give councils their money back. It envisages a totally Government-controlled operation.

As far as the naked eye can see, the legislation simply issues wholly conventional supplementary credit approvals. Local authorities can do absolutely zilch unless that nice man the Secretary of State—John, as I suppose he would be called these days—comes along with the permission to borrow.

The legislation leaves a mass of questions unanswered. The Minister did not mention new capital receipts, which are at least £1 billion a year, and I suspect that the departmental estimates are that if set-aside were not to be required in the future, that could be expected to increase public expenditure by up to £2 billion a year. What happens to future capital receipts? Will they simply be locked up, as Labour Members say existing ones are? Are we to use the existing ones back to back, as it were, against credit approvals, while still leaving the new ones locked up?

The Secretary of State has singularly failed, from both sides of the House, to answer that question. What about phasing? When is the process to start? I think that the Minister said that the first tranche would be in this fiscal year. Will it be a five-year programme? Some people are talking about £200 million or £250 million in the first tranche; at that speed, it will take 20 years to honour the pledge to mobilise the £5 billion that has been talked about.

The Minister went some way towards answering the question about the link to regeneration and training. I welcome that link and consider it sensible. She said that local authorities would have to present coherent plans, and I hope that she will insist on that. I hope that she will pay attention to the extent to which such plans are compatible with and will add to existing regeneration programmes.

Many local authorities may have money under the single regeneration budget, with estates renewal programmes and transfer programmes under way. It would be silly not to try to incorporate those as a coherent whole, allowing the sum of the parts to add up to more than would be the case if each element were counted separately. It would be common sense to ensure that the programmes were genuinely integrated.

The Minister spoke of a 15 per cent. limit, but there might be occasions on which it made sense in a particular area renewal programme to go a little beyond that. That would be unnecessary on other occasions, but I hope that there can be some flexibility in the way in which she applies the rules in practice, to allow the overall impact to be considered.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Does the right hon. Gentleman understand the scale of the housing crisis? Has he any idea of the problems faced by people

throughout the country? Has he experienced some of the Victorian, Dickensian housing conditions that exist in almost every constituency in the land? How many young homeless people did he trip over on his way to the House this afternoon?

Mr. Curry: I regret the tone of the hon. Gentleman's intervention. First, it is the Labour Government who have just said that it will be possible for a part of these resources to be used for wider regeneration programmes and not exclusively for housing. If the hon. Gentleman wants to argue with his own Front-Bench team that is fine by me, but I think that for once they are right in that regard. It makes sense to see the wider picture. The history of regeneration is of trying to deal with one aspect of deprivation, finding that that does not work and having to revisit it before long. An integrated programme works a great deal better.

As for homeless people, no doubt the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) is unaware of the various initiatives for rough sleepers. The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has been as supportive of those as I have. We are both deeply committed to them. This is not a silly question for smirking over, but one that matters to all sensible hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Sir Paul Beresford: Does my right hon. Friend agree that we can divide the Bill into two sections—clause 1 and clause 2? The first is a smokescreen to cover for the sort of comment that we just heard from the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson)—in other words, to placate Labour Back Benchers and let them think that they are getting capital receipts instead of just a borrowing extension. On the other hand, clause 2 offers the potential for chicanery—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I appeal to hon. Members to keep their interventions brief. There should be no more long interventions.

Mr. Curry: My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) is rapidly talking himself into a position on the Standing Committee that will scrutinise the Bill. Perhaps that might bring his intervention to a somewhat premature end—it is always a threat that one can use. My hon. Friend is right. We need to examine carefully the implications of both clauses. Got right, the Bill could be a great help; got wrong, it could be a silly waste of resources. It is important to ensure that the Bill does not go badly astray.

In the normal course of events, when a local authority receives a supplementary credit approval, that would raise its credit ceiling in the housing revenue account and it could be eligible for subsidy. Will the Government follow that route or will they allow extra borrowing without increasing the subsidy? The Minister pointed out that local authorities will be eligible in the SSA system for increased allocations in relation to their increased borrowing. So that must be taken into account in the overall total that authorities will get under the revenue support grant.

The Minister covered in some degree the treatment of large-scale voluntary transfer authorities. She answered a question by saying that, as far as is understood, they will be left out of this. I will not resume our argument about whether need has to carry some sort of local authority badge to be real enough.

The Bill needs concentrated exploration. It is partly a smokescreen—the whole business of capital receipts is the clothing it wears, but the substance is a conventional credit approval mechanism. It is welcome that the measure should be linked more broadly to regeneration.

I will want assurances that it will not be a licence to local authorities to start building new council houses. We will want to ensure that the maximum amount is brought in from the private sector, because that makes great sense, and we will want to examine the measure in detail. At present, we have only the most flimsy detail. Because of that and because the Bill has been portrayed as something more ambitious when it is a fairly unambitious measure, we shall vote against it tonight and I invite my colleagues to join me in the Lobby.

4.33 pm

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for her excellent introduction to this much-needed Bill.

I enjoyed the speech by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) and I hope that it is not his last from the Opposition Front Bench, given that he has backed the potential loser in today's Conservative leadership election. The right hon. Member actually analysed the failure of the previous Government's attempts to deal with the housing crisis and acknowledged that there was a crisis. However, there is a gap in his thinking about how to tackle that crisis. To their credit, the Government recognise that there is a housing crisis, and we have introduced this measure to go some way to dealing with it. Now the Conservatives have said that they will vote against it. That leads me to conclude that the Conservative party is no further forward in its thinking than it was on 1 May, and is totally out of step with thinking in the country at large.

I speak for the first time from the Government Benches and also for the first time as the Member for Weaver Vale. The boundary commissioner cut my constituency in half, so I took the Runcorn part of my previous constituency into a new one that stretches all the way down to Northwich. I will explain how the Bill will help the two borough councils that cover my constituency, Halton and Vale Royal.

I also speak as a former leader of a local authority. I know that all shades of political opinion in local government support the Government's moves to allow capital receipts held by local authorities to be taken into account in considering supplementary credit approvals in coming months. It is a shame that they are not welcomed by the small number of Conservative Members in the House today. That is not surprising. Over the past 18 years, the politically motivated approach to housing has turned the rather successful housing for rent situation of 18 years ago into the current crisis.

The crisis is manifested in several ways, such as growing waiting lists. New Members who have held surgeries will have had families come to ask what can be done to help with the provision of family accommodation. They may have been contacted by people with negative equity whose properties face repossession by building societies. They may even have been approached by

[Mr. Mike Hall]

homeless people looking for somewhere to live. They know the nature of the problem. Hon. Members have experienced those problems for many years. I hope that the Bill will go some way to tackling them.

The Government's chosen path for providing social housing was through the Housing Corporation and the housing associations.

Mr. Keith Hill (Streatham): Which Government?

Mr. Hall: My hon. Friend rightly reminds me that I am talking about the previous Government. In 1992, they promised to increase the resources available to housing associations, yet between 1992 and when they left office on 1 May, they cut the allocation to the Housing Corporation by £1.3 billion. It is no wonder that there is a crisis in housing.

On Saturday, my constituent Mr. Moss came to see me. He had to apologise for not having got his arguments together, because his wife had died two days before. His housing association had put up his rent by £9, from £35 to £44 a week—a 25 per cent. increase. He wanted to know what I as a Member of Parliament could do to help. I had to refer him to a fair rent tribunal, and tell him that he would have to appeal quickly if anything was to be done. That emphasises the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon). The housing benefit bill has escalated from £3 billion to £13 billion. That is another reason why we need to tackle the crisis.

Part of Halton borough council was in my previous constituency of Warrington, South, and has come with me into Weaver Vale. There are 2,500 families on its waiting list. The situation in the Runcorn part of my constituency is peculiar because it is predominantly a new town development. My second and third generation constituents there find it almost impossible to get family accommodation. My constituents in Runcorn confront daily the problem of overcrowding. Demand for social and rented housing is high. Housing in Runcorn new town suffers from poor design, construction and layout. Again, the local authority faces escalating waiting lists, and the housing associations have to deal with severe problems.

Two hundred houses in Halton lack basic amenities—they are private houses—and 800 dwellings are unfit for habitation. If the local authority wanted to upgrade and modernise its 8,000 dwellings, it would need to spend £36 million on repairs alone. With the notional allocation of housing capital receipts, £12.4 million is available to it.

The Bill is intended to allow supplementary credit approvals to go to authorities such as Halton borough council so that they can plan their future and deal with their current crisis, and that will be very helpful. Halton has already begun to plan. It would like, for instance, to complete what it calls its "affordable warmth" scheme to improve heating and insulation, and, under the Bill, it could apply that scheme to 1,300 houses. That would mean a major improvement in the quality of a number of my constituents' houses.

Three hundred houses in Halton were built before 1939. The council wants to complete its investment programme to renovate those houses and bring them up to modern standards. Only 90 of its dwellings are maisonettes, which, as hon. Members will know, are very unpopular with families. With the supplementary credit approval that may result from the Bill, my local authority will be able to convert those maisonettes into the modern houses for which there is such a demand. It will also be able to build 100 new houses for rent, which will improve care in the community. All that will be possible when the Bill reaches the statute book, as it is bound to do. It contrasts starkly with the £1.6 million that the last Government allocated to housing investment. I look forward to working with Halton borough council in the years to come, so that it can begin to deal with its housing crisis in partnership with the Government.

Vale Royal borough council is new to my constituency. I am very impressed by the quality of its officers and members, and its modern, forward-looking approach to tackling the problems of its community. It has two housing lists: 1,641 families are deemed to be in housing need, with a similar number on the general local authority housing waiting list. It has 3,500 houses without central heating and 3,200 post-war houses that remain unmodernised. Given the current rate of investment permitted by the last Government, it will take the authority until the year 2010 to provide central heating in all its houses and until 2050 to modernise its existing stock. Its ability to improve its unsatisfactory housing and environmental conditions has been severely constrained by the last Government's reduction in capital spending.

The last Government's single regeneration budget failed to target scarce resources on housing projects in Vale Royal. Non-traditionally designed housing has been a particular problem: hon. Members with such houses in their constituencies will know of the difficulties associated with them. The Over estate is not in my constituency, but in that of the right hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. Goodlad); however, I know it well. With the £9 million invested in the estate action programme, it was renovated and transformed. The programme was started on the Greenfields Park estate in 1994, but has not been completed, again because of Government cuts: £750,000 is still needed to turn its housing into modern, decent accommodation. Glebe Green is another non-traditionally designed estate, and £4.5 million is needed to make its housing fit for habitation.

Vale Royal borough council looks forward to being able to deal with its problems with the supplementary credit approval that the Bill will provide. It has £10 million in capital receipts: it is another authority that has money to invest in meeting the dire housing needs in my constituency.

Vale Royal and Halton have adopted the partnership idea, working with the private and voluntary sectors to secure the very best for their areas. They are keen to ensure that they obtain the best value for whatever money is available, working in partnership with anyone who is prepared to work with them. They are also keen to ensure that their capital receipts, or the credit approvals that will result from them, are put to the best use. Most important of all, they are determined to spend their money on improving homes for rent.

The Bill signals a new era in the provision of high-quality homes for rent. It is another measure that will remove the misplaced party-political dogma from government and the determination of how we run our affairs. It will return building workers to employment and stimulate the building supply industry. It will boost the

local economy; and, most important, it will allow my local authorities to get on with the job that they were elected to do, in partnership with their private and public sector communities, and provide houses for rent. I commend it to the House.

4.45 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I am delighted to make my maiden speech in the debate on this short but important Bill, which will have a significant effect on many of my constituents.

A number of my hon. Friends who are new Members have already made their maiden speeches. My tardiness owes something to Disraeli's advice to a new Member: "It is better they wonder why you do not speak than that they wonder why you do." It must be said that if I were looking for support from my colleagues, my timing has not been perfect; but Conservative Members are not so numerous that we can afford to carry passengers indefinitely and, for better or worse, the time has now come.

I have the privilege to represent the new constituency of Runnymede and Weybridge, which was formed largely from the former Chertsey and Walton constituency, with a piece of North-West Surrey attached to it. The boundary commission seldom wins friends when naming new constituencies, but that much-maligned body has surely got it right this time in including the historic name of Runnymede in the title of a constituency for the first time.

I am sure that many hon. Members envy me a constituency which stretches from the Wentworth golf course in the west to the St. George's hill course in the east, by way of another five first-class courses. It is, perhaps, in the interest of diligent pursuit of parliamentary duties that such a constituency should return a non-golfing Member.

I follow in the footsteps of a number of eminent Members who have represented areas that are now part of my constituency, but it is my immediate predecessors in Chertsey and Walton and North-West Surrey to whom I now pay tribute. Both Sir Geoffrey Pattie and Sir Michael Grylls did excellent work on behalf of their constituents over the years, in their different ways. My special thanks are due to Sir Geoffrey Pattie for the superb apprenticeship that he bestowed on me during the 18 months before my election. He served Chertsey and Walton for 23 years, becoming a Minister and a vice-chairman of the Conservative party. I can honestly say that, if at the end of my parliamentary career I have made half as many friends and admirers in my constituency as Sir Geoffrey has, I shall regard that career as having been a great success.

Runnymede and Weybridge comprises two local authority areas, the borough of Runnymede itself and part of the borough of Elmbridge. The constituency straddles the M25 and the M3; indeed, in those road atlases that tend to exaggerate the width of roads my constituency appears to contain little other than the intersection of those two motorways. It also comprises the ancient town of Chertsey, where the Romans first crossed the River Thames, Egham, Addlestone and Weybridge, as well as the historic site of Runnymede and that of the Tudor royal palace of Oatlands. Those historic locations, together with a selection of smaller towns and villages and the garden estates of Wentworth and St. George's Hill, are set in the beautiful Surrey countryside, which many people are surprised to find so close to London.

Most, if not all, hon. Members will recognise the name of my constituency and may even be able to locate it geographically through their knowledge of the events in 1215. The basis of constitutional government in England began to emerge when Magna Carta was signed in the meadows by the Thames, between Staines and Windsor, near the town of Egham. We can trace the origins of our modern freedoms to that event which took place in my constituency. It was on 15 June that year when the King and the barons first met at Runnymede. During the next few days, they negotiated the charter. I am delighted to be able to commemorate this week, the 782nd anniversary of the signing of Magna Carta, by making my maiden contribution in the House in the name of Runnymede and Weybridge.

Rather more recently, Brooklands, in Weybridge, has been renowned as the home of British motor sport and the birthplace of the British aviation industry. It spawned an engineering industry in the area, which provided an important part of the country's aviation resource during the second world war. It has also created a surprisingly diverse economy in our constituency.

The Brooklands museum is an extraordinary tribute to the men of vision and spirit who built those twin industries on Hugh Locke-King's race-track during the 1920s and 1930s. I strongly recommend hon. Members to take the time to visit that museum when passing through my constituency.

Like people in many similar areas of the home counties, my constituents enjoy the benefits of material prosperity, which are due primarily to our proximity to London and the excellent communications that we enjoy because of the motorway network and Heathrow airport. We also suffer because of that proximity from traffic, noise, pollution and the inexorable pressure for further development. The challenge for my constituency as we move into the new millennium will be to get the balance right. We must achieve the correct balance between continuing prosperity and maintaining the quality of life in the area. That will not be an easy task, but I look forward to playing my part, together with the elected local authorities in the constituency, in achieving it over the years to come.

It will be a pleasure to work with those local authorities, especially Surrey county council, now returned to Conservative control by a substantial majority, and Runnymede borough council, which is also Conservative controlled. Whatever other messages the electors of Surrey may have sent out on 1 May, they clearly voted yes to sound Conservative principles and good management in local government.

Runnymede has the lowest council tax in Surrey while, by general consensus, delivering a high standard of services. It has no statutory obligation to do so, but it is the highest spending authority on services for the elderly in Surrey. Its programme of upgrading and improving council-owned housing stock has the widespread support of tenants. Its private sector partnerships have attracted interest across the country. A key factor in achieving that enviable combination of low council tax and high service provision has been the careful management of its capital receipts. Runnymede is debt-free and it has chosen to invest its capital receipts to produce a substantial income to supplement the council tax for the benefit of all the people of Runnymede.

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

When the Labour party first promoted the idea of the release of capital receipts, it was presented as some kind of cost-free option. The idea was to take out from under the bed the pot of gold that the wicked Tories had squirrelled away and to spend it to good effect. It is now generally understood that there is no pot of gold. To the extent that set-aside capital receipts are cash-backed, the cash is largely in the wrong places. In public sector borrowing terms, the receipts have already been taken into account. Any increase in the aggregate supplementary credit approvals issued will result in an increase in the public sector borrowing requirement. There is no offsetting effect on the PSBR from any notional release of set-aside capital receipts. There was no mention earlier of the Revenue effects of the increased housing provision that the Government are seeking. If the Government achieve anything by the Bill it will be only by robbing Peter to pay Paul.

The reference in the Bill to capital receipts is a smoke-screen. It does not detail the methodology that will apply in determining the supplementary credit applications. If it is to increase the amount of investment in social housing, it must envisage an increase in the aggregate amount of borrowing by local authorities for that purpose.

The Bill provides a thin cover, through the mechanism of taking total capital receipts into account when determining the supplementary credit approvals, for a transfer of borrowing power from authorities with capital receipts to those without. In many cases, that will mean a transfer of borrowing power from authorities that have managed their housing stock well; taken a forward-looking, innovative approach to housing; and undertaken large-scale voluntary transfers to those that have succeeded in frustrating their tenants' right to buy and which have eschewed the opportunities of the large-scale voluntary transfers that have brought such a welcome diversity to the social housing sector. Incidentally, such transfers have also attracted £4 billion of private sector money, which otherwise would not have been available. The Bill represents the worst kind of subsidy—a subsidy from the efficient to the inefficient.

The implementation of the Bill represents an unjustifiable penalisation of thrifty, well-managed councils such as Runnymede and an erosion of the principle of local autonomy and accountability, which the Government purport to favour. It will also lead directly to the imposition of higher council taxes and higher rents as receipt-rich authorities are forced to run down their balances and forgo the considerable income that those balances currently generate. No less an organisation than Shelter, hardly a well-known supporter of the Conservative view of the world, has calculated that council house rents will rise by £6 a week if all the receipts are released. It is clear that council taxes will rise or services will be cut as prudent councils find that the dice are loaded against them and are forced to liquidate investments.

The Bill is an attack on thrift and good management. It represents a thinly veiled transfer of borrowing power to Labour's friends in local government. I fear that my constituents may expect more of the same when the local government settlement is announced.

The Bill attacks the capital balances of prudent authorities and an attack on their revenue support will not be far behind. It is the new Government's double whammy for the council tax payers of Surrey.

When the Bill is stripped of the smokescreen of capital receipts, it is clear that it paves the way for either an increase in the PSBR or for the reallocation of borrowing power away from receipt-rich authorities. It would be better if it said so plainly without hiding behind the fig leaf of capital receipts. It represents an inefficient way of achieving the Government's legitimate manifesto commitment to higher investment in social housing.

The Bill is unfair in its effect on prudent local authorities. It is lacking in detail. It confers excessive discretion on Ministers. In short, it is an ill-conceived piece of legislation and I urge the House to vote against it on Second Reading.

4.58 pm

Valerie Davey (Bristol, West): I congratulate the right honourable—I am sorry, the honourable, although he might become right honourable in time—Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) on his maiden speech. I admire him for wading in on the detail of the Bill, but I see it clearly as a supplementary credit approvals Bill and wonder at some of his detailed remarks. I was more pleased to hear about the history of his constituency and delighted that he has been able to celebrate Magna Carta in that way.

It is also appropriate that I am making my maiden speech during a debate on local government finance. In Bristol, West, local government funding—or rather cuts in funding, together with the unfair and overly complex system of distributing rate support grant—was high on the agenda during the general election campaign. Even capital funding was questioned when, with a backlog of repair needed for Bristol's schools, the local education authority was given an allocation for this year of £17,500. However, more specific to today's debate and of widespread concern to my constituency is the fact that Bristol has the highest number of homeless people outside London, most of them in Bristol, West. In addition, a recent survey showed that one in eight houses in Bristol is unfit and in urgent need of repair, so the case for this Bill is clear.

Homelessness and poor housing are not the images of Bristol, West that most visitors and many residents would recognise. It is a city which is a centre of commerce, especially banking, with a prestigious university and hospitals with excellent regional specialisms. The Clifton area, with its fine Georgian crescents and terraces, rivals the architectural prowess of Bath; and I could go on, citing the Downs, fringed with the large, comfortable Victorian houses of Henleaze. The fact is that Bristol, West, with an electorate of more than 86,000—making it the second most populous constituency after the Isle of Wight—is a microcosm of the world, divided south-north between the have-nots and the haves.

That gap has widened in recent years in respect of jobs and opportunities as well as housing. Fortunately, Bristol, West has a centuries-old tradition of bridging gaps, both literally and between peoples. There has long been support for people with enterprise and initiative, especially those challenging the norm and refusing to accept that something cannot be done—even at election time, I am glad to say. Brunel's suspension bridge and his

iron ship, the SS Great Britain, are both testimony to that vision and pioneering spirit. A smaller wooden ship—the replica of John Cabot's The Matthew—is even now crossing the Atlantic, celebrating an enterprise that reached Newfoundland 500 years ago. Just 50 years ago, Bristol extended a hand of friendship to Hanover, which in 1947 was an unusual twinning, as have been more recent links with Tblisi in Georgia and Beira in Mozambique.

Bristol, West is cosmopolitan and although it has been impoverished by divisions, it can and will be enriched by its diversity. To quote the *Financial Times* survey of the city earlier this month, there is in Bristol a "new spirit of co-operation". Partnerships between the city council, commerce and industry are ensuring important new developments at Bristol international airport; and the harbourside area, with millennium and, we hope, Arts Council funding, will be transformed to include an eyecatching Centre for the Performing Arts. Planning for that is going ahead, with the local community and the regional community in mind, to provide local employment and a cultural base for local children.

Over the years, politicians have also made their contribution. Under the statue of Edmund Burke in the city centre are these words:

"I want to be a Member of Parliament to have my share of doing good and resisting evil."

All Bristol Members of Parliament since then have, I am sure, shared that objective, albeit some with a more radical agenda than others. My immediate predecessor, William Waldegrave, gave this House, his party and the Bristol, West constituency committed service for 18 years. During that time, he held office in a wide range of Departments, including Education, the Environment, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Health; he was Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and most recently served in the Treasury—no mean achievement and one that I suspect some of today's leadership candidates might wish they had. He and I often disagreed fundamentally, not least over our reading and understanding of the Scott report, but it was always in a courteous manner. In the constituency, his office had an enviable reputation for efficiency and I know that the many people who have received his help and support over the years would want me to record their appreciation.

To return to the subject of the debate, I assure hon. Members that Bristol has already taken steps to reduce the number of homeless people. The Hub centre brings together in one building and mainly for single homeless people the housing department, social services, the health authority, the Department of Social Security and the Employment Service offices and the voluntary sector. It is a model of good practice. A foyer centre is being built and the money from the initiative for those sleeping rough will be well spent. However, more has to be done and I recognise in the Bill another step towards healing the gap in Bristol, West and throughout the country between those who do and those who do not have a home. I commend the Bill.

5.6 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I pay tribute to the maiden speeches we have just heard from the hon. Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey)—Bristol being the capital of Cuba, the County that Used to Be Avon—and from the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), whose description of his constituency suggested that his predecessors might be spending more time with their golf clubs.

Addressing the Bill at hand, our main concern is that when one is in a hole—and housing finance is in a very big hole—the first thing to do is to stop digging. The Bill basically reduces the rate of the digging, but does no more than that. We heard the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) speak of the number of pre-1914 houses and his words are true of many Pennine areas. The United Kingdom has the highest percentage of pre-1919 housing in Europe; much of it is uninhabitable by human beings and that problem is worsening. The scale of the housing crisis will not be tackled by the Bill. The hon. Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran) said that there were 4,777 people on her waiting list and asked whether the Bill would help them. The answer to that is that four or five might be helped, but certainly not 4,777.

We do not consider the Bill to be the right way to tackle the housing crisis, but I have to admit that it is better than no action at all. It is far better to reduce the rate of digging than to fail to do anything, so we broadly welcome the Bill, but we would have preferred two different measures. One Bill we would love the Government to adopt is one that would give a power of general competence to local authorities, so that they could decide whether to sell assets and where to spend the money from capital receipts without the permission of central Government. They would then be answerable to their local electorate for those decisions.

We are not convinced that redistributing supplementary credit approvals is the best way of tackling the housing crisis. We should like to know why housing investment programmes are not based entirely on need—that seems a far more sensible way of meeting housing need. We need to know precise details of the housing needs assessment so that we can judge whether it will be fair and whether it will include all relevant considerations.

I was glad to hear that there will be no restriction on the definition of housing purposes, but will local authorities decide how much to spend on new build or renovation? Will the looser definition of housing purposes extend to capacity building for tenant participation, for instance? We hope for ministerial answers.

Why does the Bill deal only with current or set-aside receipts? How will new receipts be dealt with? Will an extra subsidy be provided to ensure that councils can keep rents affordable and standards high? If the timetable in view is the financial year 1998, when will the first capital receipts become available?

We should also like to know to whom the plans that local authorities will be asked to draw up will be sent? Who will decide whether to approve them? And what criteria will determine whether such plans are approved?

A second fundamental point not yet dealt with in the debate concerns the public sector borrowing requirement and how we account for housing receipts. When an authority has sold an asset, the loss of that asset should be built into the calculations. Thus far it has not been. It seems strange that an investment made possible by realising an asset should count against, in terms of the PSBR. The Government should look into that carefully and perhaps consider a system of general government financial deficit; similar systems are used by other countries to get around the problem.

[Mr. Adrian Sanders]

I leave the House with my reason for believing that the Bill does not tackle the housing crisis to any great extent, even though it is a welcome start. According to Shelter, the £5 billion will, at best, return housing spending to what it was under the Conservatives in 1992. By deciding to stick to Conservative spending plans for two years, the Government have effectively committed themselves to a £1.3 billion cut in housing investment by 1999. That puts the Bill in perspective.

There should be no jumping up and down and cheering for the Bill. We welcome and support it as a step in the right direction, but it is not the right way to tackle the housing crisis. No one should imagine that it will do a great deal to help constituents or the homeless, because it will not.

5.13 pm

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): I am pleased to follow the assured, pithy speech made by the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders), although I would take issue with some of his criticisms.

I thought that the Minister of State's speech, opening the debate, was a milestone in local government history and a significant advance in the history of the Labour party in Parliament. On the other hand, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), a former Minister of great technical expertise, was untypically ungenerous and pernickety in his response. I regretted that.

There is nothing quite like a general election campaign to show candidates the true state of local housing stock, which is why I wanted to speak today. The Bill is certainly welcome. It is a practical measure which will improve the lives of hundreds of my poorest, least fortunate, most hard-pressed constituents. Without a shadow of doubt, local government throughout Wales will welcome the Bill.

The Principality is the seat of some of the most difficult housing problems in the UK, but I am certain that the Bill will help. When houses have been modernised by my hard-working local council, by installing central heating, double-glazed units and new doors, residents have told me of their delight. I have concluded that the quality of their lives has been greatly enhanced.

Once houses are restored, they become healthy to live in, free of damp and worthy of the description "civilised housing". In the townships of Shotton, Saltney, Buckley, Hope, Connah's Quay and Aston, the plea is still: repair and modernise; give us central heating, replace the windows, change the doors. These are not outrageous requests at the end of the 20th century. Modernisation will help young children with asthma who live in sub-standard homes. It will also help the arthritic elderly.

Modernisation will certainly create jobs, in my constituency and throughout Wales, for painters and decorators, joiners, glaziers, brickies, plumbers and local hauliers. Even on disputed figures, at least 1,600 people remain unemployed in the Deeside area. I believe that the Bill will help the unemployed into training and genuine work—work that will benefit their fellow citizens.

My council, Flintshire, estimates that it needs about £16 million over the next five years for capital expenditure on housing. In the first year of the new Flintshire council, following the reorganisation of local government, its credit approval was cut to £1.7 million; the year after that it was cut to £1.4 million. That amounted to an horrendous cut of 45 per cent. over two years—very debilitating for the whole area.

My council has 6,900 families on the housing waiting list. Usually, the families are young, extremely stressed and poverty stricken and, as I have discovered from my surgeries, they are increasingly desperate. All they ask for is a home as a basic foundation for their family. I should like to think that this measure will speed the delivery of something that will enhance my constituents' lives. This Government, thank heaven, are prepared to help some of the more unfortunate constituents in my area.

The current new affordable rented housing programme in Flintshire is laughable. It is a monument to previous Administrations. As of today, just 30 starts by several housing associations are under way. That will not meet the problem that confronts us.

The former Alyn and Deeside district council, which is now subsumed in the new Flintshire county council, passed about £7 million of sales receipts into the treasury of the new Flintshire county council. I make this request of Ministers: I want those receipts recycled now into estates on Deeside. That is the principal plea of my local councillors and it is what residents of those estates seek.

There are in my constituency many large, post-war, aging council estates in urgent need of modernisation. They need repairs and an urgent boost in their environmental quality. Some of our largest decaying estates are frequently the seat of our gravest social problems. Unemployment and decay appear to spawn crime, vandalism, drug abuse and frequent break-ins. The Bill, by enhancing the quality of life on those aging estates, may well help us to tackle the alarming and emerging problems of what is now called the British underclass. I hope that it does.

The Bill is a response to a manifesto commitment worth keeping. It was an important humanitarian promise, which I believe is well kept as it is encompassed in the Bill. The Bill creates jobs. It will improve public health. It will create happiness and satisfaction. It is a simple, eminently justifiable measure. It represents social justice. I support it whole-heartedly and believe that it will probably be the most practical, worthwhile measure that the Government will enact.

5.21 pm

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): The financial basis of the Bill reminds me of Bills concerning other aspects of proposed Government expenditure that we have debated during the past two or three weeks. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) suggested, the Bill before us is built on sand.

Opposition Members have concluded that, in opposition, the Labour party had not properly worked out its plans for public expenditure. It claimed that in many areas of government, including housing, the Conservative Government had failed to put in sufficient money and resources. It then told the electorate that, in government, it would follow the public expenditure plans of the previous Conservative Government, and certainly their departmental plans for the next two years.

I suspect that when the Labour Government and the Chancellor of the Exchequer achieved office, they recognised that they could not square the circle, so they were forced to seek expedients to try to match the amount of public expenditure that they require.

Detail on the financial basis of the Bill as outlined by the Minister of State is wanting. Those of us who have sat through consideration of other Bills introduced by the Government have found the same lack of detail in explanation of the finances. We must bear in mind the statement made last week by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. He said that there would be a fundamental review of public expenditure. In my opinion, that is the key to examining the Bill and others that have been, or will be, presented to the House.

The Government cannot deliver on their twin promise of improving public services and meeting the public expenditure limits set by the Conservative Government.

I suspect that when the Deputy Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions—and everything else—spoke to the Chancellor, he was told that the original proposal to transfer receipts from council house sales to local authorities would ultimately be calculated as public expenditure, so he had to come up with a smokescreen to mask that shortfall.

Opposition Members realise that in many constituencies there are severe problems in housing and social conditions, but in many other places such problems are not the consequence of central Government mismanagement or failure to allocate resources. In many areas—we have seen it before—problems are a direct consequence of mismanagement by local authorities, the overwhelming majority of which are Labour controlled. They have failed to manage their budgets and have run into debt.

This is not a Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill; it is a bailing out of Labour local authorities Bill. As such, I believe that it will be shown over the next few months to lack the financial basis to produce the results that many Labour Members believe are needed and will come about. They must ask themselves what will happen when the Government are unable to square that circle—when they are unable to produce sufficient resources to cope with the problems that Labour-controlled local authorities have failed to address. The public will take note of the fact that there is a giant credibility gap.

As in the case of previous Bills, the Government need to take the Bill back and work at it again. Ironically, this is another Bill that is being rushed through the House. The only saving grace is that we have not had a review. There is a delightful contradiction: in areas where there is a relatively simple solution, the Government decide to conduct a review; where there is a difficulty, they try to rush legislation through the House without considering the details.

Conservative Members believe that the Bill is fundamentally flawed. We believe that it will not address the problem and that, ultimately, it will increase public expenditure. I suggest to Labour Members that the pay-off to them will be made in local government elections in a year's time, when their promises on this and many other matters will be shown to be flawed.

I oppose the Bill.

5.27 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury North): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for allowing me to make my maiden speech as the first Labour Member of Parliament for Bury, North by contributing to this important debate.

It is a particular pleasure to be able to speak today after having listened to almost 30 maiden speeches during the various stages of the Education (Schools) Bill in the past two weeks, although the benefit obtained by listening to so many excellent speeches by other hon. Members is negated by the diminishing possibility of saying anything remotely original in one's own.

First, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Alistair Burt. Alistair served the people of Bury, North conscientiously for 14 years. He was well known and well regarded by his constituents and well respected as someone who took his responsibilities as a Member of Parliament seriously, performed his duties assiduously and carried out his ministerial responsibilities efficiently and with a degree of compassion that, I suspect, came to be increasingly at odds with the policies of the party that he represented.

Alistair Burt and I were both born and brought up in Bury, North and even attended the same secondary school—a coincidence that took on an ironic significance in the context of last week's debate on the Education (Schools) Bill.

I should also like to pay tribute to another of my predecessors, Frank White, the last Member of Parliament for the previous constituency of Bury and Radcliffe. Before boundary changes altered his seat, Frank served many of my present constituents conscientiously for nine years and I am delighted to say that he is still prominent and influential in public life locally. Both Alistair Burt and Frank White won three successive elections and it would be irresponsible of me not to attempt to continue that important local tradition.

My constituency will be well known to many hon. Members for two things above all: its black puddings and its football team. Just as in recent years the humble Bury black pudding has experienced a metamorphosis from its former status as cheap nutrition for the northern industrial working class to its new status as a delicacy that graces the tables of the most exclusive restaurants, so Bury football club, which was languishing in the lower divisions, this year won the second division championship, thus becoming one of the few football league teams in recent history to gain promotion in two successive seasons. I am sure that all hon. Members would wish to congratulate the players, staff and management of the club on that achievement. Bury football club is a model of what can be achieved by a club in a small town operating on modest budgets with strong community support. Bury still holds the record for the biggest winning margin in any English cup final. Our 6-0 defeat of Derby County in 1903 was a landslide victory of truly new Labour proportions.

However, even Bury North's gastronomic delights and sporting achievements are surpassed by its historic significance. Bury was the home of many notable manufacturers and inventors who drove forward the first industrial revolution, during which the Lancashire cotton industry contributed so much to the wealth and influence of the United Kingdom. Tragically, however, the millions of men and women who spent their lives working the machines in those cotton factories saw little of the wealth and power that they helped to create.

[Mr. David Chaytor]

Bury is also the home of the Lancashire Fusiliers, one of our country's most distinguished old regiments. Its long and proud history is vividly portrayed in the regimental museum in Bury and it was a source of great pride and pleasure to thousands of local people when the Prime Minister, who was then Leader of the Opposition, visited our museum recently to inspect the unique collection of Victoria Crosses awarded to soldiers of the Lancashire Fusiliers for their bravery during the Gallipoli landings.

Bury's most famous son, however, was none other than Sir Robert Peel, who was born in Bury in 1788 and whose statue still dominates one of the main squares in the town centre. Sadly and inexplicably, Sir Robert did not stay long in Bury. Among his many remarkable achievements, Sir Robert Peel will be remembered not only for successfully splitting the Tory party in two and keeping it out of power for a generation, but for his lesser known role as the first British Prime Minister to preside over a Budget—I think that it was the 1846 Budget—that contained a 7d in the pound increase in income tax. For those who believe that history repeats itself—the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce—the parallels between the Conservative party in the mid-1840s and in the mid-1990s are remarkable. I imagine that, today of all days, the choice between tragedy and farce has been particularly poignant for Conservative Members.

Bury, North's indelible place in history was surely secured just four weeks ago in this House. Hon. Members who were listening attentively to the debate on the Second Reading of the Scottish devolution Bill will recall a reference by my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) to the "Bury, North question". Bury, North is a long way from West Lothian, and the byzantine subtleties of the Scottish devolution debate do not often provide the main topic of conversation for my constituents; I was therefore somewhat embarrassed that not only did I not know the answer to the Bury, North question but I did not even understand the question itself.

Following that debate and related newspaper articles in *The Sunday Times* and *Scotland on Sunday*, everyone must surely now be aware that the Bury, North question—why should English constituencies like Bury contain an average of 68,000 electors when Scottish constituencies contain a mere 55,000—is second only in significance to the West Lothian question. The point that I want to make, however, is that there is another Bury, North question, which is of far greater concern to my constituents. I shall return to it later in my speech.

My constituency is an important industrial and commercial centre to the north of the city of Manchester. It has resisted pressures to become completely absorbed within the Greater Manchester conurbation and retained a remarkable sense of identity and community, which has led to its being described as "an urban village". It is an increasingly popular place to live. My constituents like living in Bury. They tend to live there a long time and often return—as I did—after several years' absence. The pride in coming from Bury, the sense of belonging to a town with a strong identity and the belief in the importance of hard work are important qualities which have helped my constituents make the transition from a traditional Lancashire textile town with a heavy dependence on engineering and paper manufacturing to a modern town with a diversified economy which is well placed to take advantage of opportunities created by the white heat of the information technology revolution.

When I was at school in Bury in the late 1950s and the 1960s, every building in the town was black with the soot of factory chimneys. Now, thanks to the leadership provided by a progressive and efficient local authority, Bury's historic buildings have been restored, many of our extensive parks and public open spaces have been improved, our shopping centre has been redeveloped and our market remains one of the busiest in the north-west of England.

Above all, Bury is proud of its education system, the coherence of which is due largely to the positive role played by the local education authority over many years. Opting out has had little impact in Bury, which has been consistently towards the top of the local authority league tables—an achievement which is a tribute to the hard work and dedication of Bury's teachers over many years.

In recent years, all those achievements have been put at risk because the funds—both revenue and capital—available to the local authority for investment have been cut to the bone. This is the real Bury, North question: why is Bury treated so harshly compared with almost every other similar local authority? Why is Bury allowed to spend only £79 per person on capital expenditure when Bolton is allowed to spend £118, Rochdale £120, Trafford £175 and Oldham £219? This year, the local authority has suffered cuts to its revenue budget of 10 per cent. and to its capital budget of 62 per cent. Next year, on current figures, a further cut of 6 per cent. is predicted for the revenue budget.

The draconian cuts to this year's revenue and capital budgets aroused enormous public anger and led to the largest public demonstration the town had ever seen. Almost 15,000 people signed petitions calling on the Government to relax their stringency. The previous Government did not listen. Bury suffers particularly because of the inequitable area cost adjustment element of the revenue support grant and I hope that the new Government will listen carefully to the arguments advanced by the special interest group of metropolitan authorities, whose membership is gradually increasing.

Bury also suffers gross discrimination through the allocation of standard spending assessment. For almost every SSA indicator for our main services, Bury is significantly worse off, compared not only with other districts in Greater Manchester but with the average for all metropolitan authorities. Our total SSA for the major services is 15 per cent. less than the average for metropolitan authorities. Some individual SSAs are as much as 75 per cent. less than the average.

On capital investment, this year we have an annual capital guideline for education of a mere £55,000 against an outstanding capital programme of £4 million. On social services, we have spending powers this year of £18,000 compared with spending needs totalling more than £3 million. On highways, we spend 40 per cent. less per kilometre than the average for other metropolitan districts.

Bury, North has a large quantity of late Victorian terrace houses, most of which are privately owned. A recent private sector housing stock condition survey identified £86 million worth of repairs and improvements. Bury, North has a significant amount of post-war council

housing. The 1993 stock condition survey identified £36 million of repairs and improvements. In recent years, 2,000 people a year have applied to the local authority for assistance on the ground of homelessness. We have a growing population, rising particularly in the 16 to 25 age group and the 75-plus age group. Those are the people who require special help with housing.

This, again, is the Bury, North question: when the needs of the community for better housing and more low-cost housing are so great, and the people are willing to work hard to rebuild their own communities, why have the Government starved Bury of the capital investment needed to do the job?

I shall finish with a brief anecdote. During the recent general election campaign, I spent a considerable time in the part of Bury where I spent the first eight years of my life. It contains one of the largest and most deprived housing estates in the town. There, one will still find some of the poorest housing in the north of England.

The quality of life for many of my constituents is no better, and in many cases much worse, than it was when I lived there 40 years ago. Youth unemployment is far higher than it was 40 years ago. The number of homeless young people is far higher than it was 40 years ago. The primary school that I attended and which I visited during the election campaign operated on a split site half a mile apart in 1957. It still operates on a split site half a mile apart in 1997, and the quality of its buildings is poorer.

There is a desperate need for investment in housing improvement and for more low-cost housing. The people of East Ward, like so many of my constituents in Bury, North, are prepared to work hard to rebuild their communities. All they want is a better life for their children. We owe it to them to supply the capital investment that they need to start the process of eradicating youth unemployment and youth homelessness, and to enable them to take control of the regeneration of their communities. I am delighted that this Bill makes a small but significant step in that direction.

5.41 pm

Mrs. Jackie Ballard (Taunton): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), who made a very polished first speech. I am sure that he is now feeling the relief that I hope to feel in a few moments.

I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech especially in a debate on housing, a subject on which I have campaigned for many years and which is a matter of great concern to my constituents.

I am honoured to represent Taunton—a constituency which is not only varied and attractive, but has been represented by some distinguished Members in the past—perhaps none more distinguished than Sir Edward du Cann, who was the Member for 31 years, a record that I do not expect to achieve.

The House will well remember Sir Edward's many contributions to his party and to the House. He retired in 1987 and was replaced by my immediate predecessor, David Nicholson. I know that Mr. Nicholson will forgive me if I say that he was never quite able to live up to Sir Edward's standards of sartorial elegance. However, he was a strong defender of many of the interests of his constituents and I was pleased to work with him when I was deputy leader of Somerset county council on a successful appeal against the capping of the county's budget two years ago.

I am the first woman to represent my constituency, but not the first Liberal. From 1922 to 1924, it was represented by Sir John Hope Simpson, who sadly was a Member for less than two years—a record which I do expect to beat. He was, however, more successful than Benjamin Disraeli, who is being mentioned for the second time in this debate and who failed to get elected when he stood in Taunton in 1835.

History records that there have been many rebellions in Somerset over the years. The 1497 rising of the Cornish against Henry VII's imposition of taxes to fund war against the Scots was supported by Somerset, and, as a Scot by birth, I am happy to continue that positive link. Somerset supported Parliament in the civil war of 1642 to 1648, and, of course, the part played by the west country in the Monmouth rebellion is well known. I am sure that my party leader will be watching his enlarged west country contingent in the House closely for signs of rebellion.

I am my party's spokesperson on women's issues, and I am pleased to tell hon. Members that the patriotic celebration of the outbreak of peace in 1814 saw the beginning of women's participation in civic processions. Previously, such processions had been made up of men only, led by a John Bull figure, but in Taunton's peace festival there was a Mrs. Bull and many other women in the procession. Many years elapsed, however, between 1814 and the election of the first woman Member for the constituency.

Perhaps we do things more slowly in my constituency. I felt somewhat inadequate when I considered the number of hon. Members who had made their maiden speeches well before me, but when I looked in the Library I found that my predecessor, who was elected in June 1987, made his maiden speech in November that year, and it was also in a debate on housing. Perhaps we wait until we really have something to say.

When hon. Members think of my constituency, they may imagine only the historic county town of Taunton, which is set on the river Tone, with a thriving market and many amenities. It is the home of county cricket and the administrative centre for the county council. However, the constituency also includes the important town of Wellington, whose residents are fortunate to have Liberal Democrat representation at every level of government, from the active and lively town council to the European Parliament. We also have many small villages with evocative names such as Combe Florey, North Curry, Langford Budville and Bishops Lydeard.

My constituency stretches well beyond those villages to Simonsbath on Exmoor. The Exmoor national park has the most varied landscapes—open moorland, sheltered valleys and ancient woodland. Along with the areas of outstanding natural beauty of the Quantocks and the Blackdown hills, Exmoor acts as a magnet for many tourists every year. It is also the home of a special and pure breed of wild pony and of a wonderful red deer herd, of which I am sure hon. Members will hear much more in the coming months.

I have tried to describe something of the beauty and diversity of my constituency, but it is not all roses round the cottage door and supping cider at tea time. We have our problems, too. There are 1,800 people on the Taunton Deane housing register, many people living in substandard or overcrowded houses in multiple

[Mrs. Jackie Ballard]

occupation, 269 families in housing priority need, people living temporarily in hostels for homeless families and 30 single people every night in the emergency access accommodation provided by the Taunton Association for the Homeless.

There are even people who sleep rough on the streets of Taunton, a situation made worse by the reduction in housing benefit for young people under the age of 25. I hope that the Government will move quickly to halt the extension of the single room rent regulations to people under 60, as that would only add to the number of homeless people across the country.

There are two local authorities in my constituency—West Somerset district council and Taunton Deane borough council. The major part of the constituency is contained within the Taunton Deane area, and I intend no slight to West Somerset by concentrating on Taunton Deane in my remarks.

Taunton Deane borough council has been an excellent housing authority, both under Conservative administration in the past and under Liberal Democrat administration since 1991. It has a proud record of investment in its own housing stock and of co-operation and partnership with local private landlords, housing associations and the county council on special needs housing. The council has involved its tenants in tenants' forums and actively encourages their input into decisions affecting their homes.

Despite the efficiency and innovation of Taunton Deane borough council, it cannot meet all the local social housing needs. As I have said, there are about 2,000 families in housing need and the council has £17 million set-aside capital receipts from the sale of council housing. The housing problems in my constituency may sound less significant than those in inner cities, but it is only a matter of scale. Housing problems and homelessness are as keenly felt by every individual in the south-west as in any metropolitan area.

The people of my constituency have a right—and I do not use the word without thought: they have a right to shelter, security and a roof over their heads. They want a significantly greater housing capital programme and a return to local authority house building without the necessity to transfer stock to housing companies or housing associations. In Taunton Deane borough council, tenants have an excellent landlord whose rents are reasonable—certainly lower than those in the private sector and lower than those of most housing associations. The landlord is also approachable and democratically accountable.

Nationally, as in my constituency, over the past five years or more, the social housing stock has declined while social housing need has grown. I believe strongly and sincerely that we need to reinvigorate local authority stock and tenants by showing that local authority housing is an on-going concern on the part of the Government.

5.49 pm

Ms Beverley Hughes (Stretford and Urmston): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak on a matter that is of the utmost importance to my constituents and to the constituents of many other hon. Members. I congratulate the hon. Member for Taunton (Mrs. Ballard) on the excellent picture that she gave of her constituency. She also demonstrated her knowledge and experience of the important subject of housing—presumably gained from her local government background—and I have no doubt that she will make further memorable contributions to the House in due course.

I rise to address the House for the first time as the new Member for the new constituency of Stretford and Urmston. Over the past few weeks, I have discovered that many hon. Members are not familiar with the location of my constituency. However, I have also found that as soon as I mention Old Trafford, Manchester United or Lancashire county cricket club, they know immediately that Stretford and Urmston is not to be confused with Stratford-on-Avon, Strangford or Stafford, worthy as those places may be.

Stretford and Urmston is in Greater Manchester and lies wholly within the borough of Trafford, of which I was leader prior to my election to the House. The constituency is just to the west of Manchester city centre and embraces the inner-city areas of Old Trafford and Stretford, the former Lancashire county districts of Urmston and Davyhulme, and Partington and Carrington, a disadvantaged and isolated but very close community whose people have deserved better than they have received in recent years.

As I mentioned, mine is a new constituency which was created from half of each of the former constituencies of Stretford and Davyhulme. Happily, however, this is not so much a shotgun marriage as a welcome reunion because nine of the wards in my constituency were part of a previous Stretford constituency many years ago and are pleased to have come together again. The tenth ward, Partington and Carrington, is glad to be in the new constituency and to have a Labour Member of Parliament. The voters there consistently return Labour councillors in local elections, but have never before had a Labour Member of Parliament.

Mine is a wonderful constituency of which I am very proud. We boast some important attributes. I have mentioned Manchester United and Lancashire county cricket club, two teams of international acclaim. We are also the location for the new Trafford centre, the largest retail shopping centre and regional sports complex in Europe. Once the Secretary of State for the Environment made his decision on the go-ahead for the centre, which took nine years, we welcomed the opportunities that it would provide. We must ensure, however, that the opportunities for employment go to our local unemployed people and that we protect our existing town centres.

Our area is also to be the home of the prestigious Imperial War Museum of the North, having won the bid in partnership with the Manchester Ship Canal Company and with the support of other local authorities and private sector partners. The museum is to be on the Trafford side of the Manchester ship canal, opposite the Lowry centre to which my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) referred in her maiden speech. It is very much part of a strategy by the local authorities and local business to revitalise the city region economy and the economy of the north-west, an objective of great importance and some urgency to us.

Both the Trafford centre and the Imperial War Museum of the North are located in Trafford Park which, as I am sure many hon. Members will know, was once the world's

!argest manufacturing park. It is still a significant contributor to the regional and national economy, and it is home to many international companies and many medium and small indigenous businesses.

My constituency is well blessed. It is at the hub of the sub-regional and regional economy and it has enormous potential—not least in the warmth, diligence and commitment of its people, whom I thank for their overwhelming support during the general election campaign and for many years before. They know, I hope, that I will represent their interests to the best of my ability.

In so saying, I hope that I can emulate the standard set by my predecessor, now Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd). He is regarded with enormous warmth and affection by his former constituents because of his unstinting work on their behalf in the best tradition of public service, which I know he supports. I have known him personally for many years and know at first hand of his diligence and commitment, and his support for his constituents through some very lean times.

My other predecessor was Winston Churchill who, as hon. Members will know, has not returned to the House. Although I cannot speak from personal experience of his work, I place on record the appreciation of his former constituents for his many years as Member of Parliament for Davyhulme. I wish him well for the future, as I am sure the House would wish.

I have enormous pride in my constituency. I live there and I have served there in local government for many years. It has enormous strengths and potential, but, like many parts of the country—perhaps especially the north-west—it has problems, of which housing is one. As leader of Trafford council, I took over a local authority in which the previous long-standing Conservative administration had presided over under-investment and a neglect of need that were little short of scandalous. I am interested in the remarks of Conservative Members and in their failure to comment on the record of the few remaining Conservative councils, especially in relation to housing.

The Conservative approach to housing produced in my constituency, which is the area of greatest need in the borough, a legacy of substandard housing and insufficient stock. The record of the local Conservative council was compounded by that of the then central Government. Investment in the provision and repair of housing declined to an all-time low of £2.1 billion last year, compared with a peak of more than £12 billion in the mid-1970s. At the same time as Government grants and credit approvals to local authorities, through the housing investment programme, were declining—they were reduced especially drastically over the past two years—local authorities were prevented from using the set-aside capital receipts from the sale of council houses to refurbish and replenish their stock. As the House knows, that is the problem with which the Bill deals.

The argument was that such receipts should be used to redeem debt. Hon. Members who are familiar with the complex local government finance arrangements will know that there is a range of views on how far it is fair for such receipts to be used to reduce borrowing, as measured by the public sector borrowing requirement, without taking into account the revenue lost through the sale of assets such as council housing—a point that Conservative Members, again, have consistently failed to mention.

What is important in the debate is, however, the consequence of the previous Government's policy and the impact on thousands of ordinary people. As other hon. Members have done, I could give many human stories about the tragic impact on the lives of families, older people, disabled people and young single people. The consequence has been a dramatic reduction in the availability and standard of affordable public and private sector housing. The impact on those people has been real pain and suffering—a blight on their lives which has had serious effects on health, physical and mental well-being and achievement. We know that poor housing can create those problems.

The Bill is designed to promote long-term investment in housing and in people. I am perplexed by the difficulty that Conservative Members have in understanding the mechanics of the Bill. By linking the use of set-aside capital receipts with the supplementary credit approval mechanism, it will begin to address the enormous housing deficit and chronic housing need and will target investment where the need is greatest.

By linking the potential for capital investment in housing with the potential to use that investment to promote housing-related regeneration, the Bill also promotes investment in people. Using the money to stimulate the creation of training and job opportunities is consistent with the Government's welfare to work objectives. By creating packages and voluntary agreements involving building contractors, further education colleges, training and enterprise councils and other organisations—this is already happening in the best local authorities—councils can establish the strong local partnerships needed not only to address housing need but to apply the released resources in ways which can begin to address the training and employment needs of their people, stimulating the regeneration of local communities and the local economy.

The Bill has been long awaited. I support and commend it as a mixture of pragmatism and vision in addressing two areas of great need.

6.1 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): We should bear in mind the fact that the Bill reflects the success of the right-to-buy policy inaugurated by the Conservative Government in 1980. I was never enthusiastic about local authorities not being able to do as they wished with the money that came in as a result of that policy. I have always believed that to avoid the nanny state it would be better to ensure that local authorities have greater discretion, which they would have to use responsibly to justify the trust of the electorate.

It would be reasonable for the Bill to increase the responsibilities of local councillors. If that led to higher council tax or more public expenditure at local government level, it would be a matter for them and they would have to pay the penalty at the next local election. That may sound slightly heretical, but we have to think clearly about where we stand on many issues. We have to get rid of some shibboleths and engage in fresh thinking.

The Bill does not give local authorities cash: it merely increases their opportunities to borrow. I am reluctant to support that. The real reason behind that—the Minister

[Mr. William Cash]

did not refer to this—is that local authorities, through the mechanisms of central Government, do not want to increase their overall borrowing because by doing so they would bump up against the Maastricht criteria. *[Interruption.]* The matter will come back again and again to haunt hon. Members on both sides who are enthusiastic about allowing the development in this country of a situation similar to that which has already caused such pain and suffering in France. Mr. Jospin has a severe problem. I suspect that Labour Members will find much the same problem.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cash: I am delighted to give way to my successor in Stafford.

Mr. Kidney: I hoped that that fact would attract the hon. Gentleman to give way to me. He is talking about bumping against the main expenditure total of the public sector borrowing requirement. On the subject of getting rid of shibboleths, would he like to move away from talking about the PSBR and talk instead about the general Government financial deficit—or would that be too continental for him?

Mr. Cash: I am delighted to declare my credentials as a true European. I want a European Community that really works. Domestic issues lie at the heart of European problems. This is a good example.

Shelter has put forward an important initative. I was concerned not to have heard support for it from the Government as I am sure that they know about it. We may hear something about it in the winding-up speech. If the Bill is passed, the money made available should be put to constructive use. Shelter proposes that

"10 per cent. of the windfall levy and 8 per cent. of capital receipts—£140 million per annum—should be spent on getting the young homeless and badly housed off benefits and into full-time training or employment."

It proposes investment in projects such as self-build and accommodation and training initiatives. I have great sympathy with the argument that such projects would have a real impact on youth unemployment. We have to think clearly and adopt a new approach to many of the problems facing young people. If the Bill is to be passed, it is important that the views of organisations such as Shelter should be taken into account.

6.7 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Thank you for calling me to make my maiden speech, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am privileged to stand here on behalf of the people of Harrow, West, where I have lived all my life. I am particularly proud to be their first Labour Member.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Robert Hughes, who represented the seat for 10 years, serving for a time as a junior Minister responsible for science and public service. His private Member's Bill and work with the National Playing Fields Association resulted in tougher guidelines for play equipment and the safer surfacing of children's playgrounds. I also acknowledge his enlightened support, against the advice of his party, for the Dunblane parents' campaign to ban all handguns.

In his maiden speech in 1987, my predecessor referred to Sir John Betjeman's description of the constituency as metroland at its best, containing

"the serried avenues of Harrow's garden villages".

Many parts of the constituency retain a village community feel—perhaps none more than Pinner, where the successful annual fair, granted under royal charter by Henry III in 1336, took place a few weeks ago. The many active residents associations work hard to continue that sense of community, striving to protect local landmarks such as Headstone manor, where Thomas à Beckett stayed on his last, ill-fated trip to Canterbury. As we speak, the Roxborne residents are striving—rightly—to protect their local park, Field End recreation ground, from development.

Harrow, West is a diverse constituency. The gourmet will find Hatch End a delight, with its many excellent restaurants. Sports fanatics will enjoy the good standard of football to be found at Harrow Borough football club in south Harrow. The famous Harrow school also lies in my constituency. Being of Welsh origin, I am always encouraged to see the delightful Welsh chapel at the foot of the beautiful and historic Harrow-on-the-Hill.

My constituency is particularly noted for the quality of its comprehensive schooling, with the strong partnership between staff, parents and pupils responsible for consistently high standards of education. That partnership has persisted despite cuts in school budgets pushed through by local Liberal Democrat and Independent Resident councillors. Schools in my constituency will therefore be delighted with the extra money coming their way as a result of the phased abolition of the assisted places scheme.

The sense of community in my constituency is further enhanced by the dynamic voluntary sector, ably led by the Harrow Association of Voluntary Service and Harrow Council for Racial Equality.

Over the past 18 years, however, the prosperous image of my constituency has begun to slip. Businesses in the key shopping areas are under considerable pressure and more than 14,000 crimes were committed in Harrow last year, with just 22 per cent. cleared up. At the same time, the under-investment in patient care that characterised the previous Government's attitude to the national health service has pushed up waiting lists and left dedicated local general practitioners and the staff at Northwick Park and Mount Vernon hospitals ever more hard pressed.

That august publication, "The Almanac of British Politics", in suggesting that there was nothing on the horizon to challenge the Tory hegemony in Harrow, West, inevitably ignored—or perhaps failed to notice—the rising homelessness. Almost 800 families are now in temporary accommodation. It certainly failed to recognise the growth of poverty in my constituency, with the number of those on low incomes doubling between 1983 and 1995.

On 1 May, Labour was given a mandate to tackle the growth in the gap between rich and poor, to confront the problem of a high incidence of families with no one in work and to challenge the sense of despair and alienation that homelessness and unemployment engender. The Bill is a fundamental part of a programme of measures that will do just that.

There is no more basic a right than the right to a decent home. Every major public health report in the past 20 years has recognised the link between bad housing—and, indeed, no housing—and ill health. There is no more powerful evidence of the Opposition's contempt for the aspirations of thousands of people trapped in temporary or unsuitable accommodation than their appalling record on investment in social housing. According to Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions figures, there has been a fall in total capital expenditure on housing of almost one third since 1991-92. Local authority housing investment is now one twelfth of the heights achieved under the previous Labour Government. My own local authority saw its housing investment programme allocation slashed by more than 40 per cent. last year.

The insecurity that bad or temporary housing produces destabilises communities, hindering children's development at school, gnawing away at family relationships and fostering social tensions. In my constituency, the Rayners Lane estate is in desperate need of refurbishment and modernisation. Such has been the paucity of funds from the previous Government for social housing that since 1988 all bids for funding to redevelop the estate have ended in failure. The Bill holds out hope to the residents of that estate that their aspirations for modernised, refurbished family homes will at last be achieved.

In supporting the Bill, I should like to draw attention to the particular need for investment in high-quality special needs housing. The shift away from institutional care to looking after people in the community and in their own homes requires the availability of good housing. For many of the most vulnerable members of our community, often facing appalling crises in their lives, good housing is an essential prerequisite for effective care packages and the often crucial links with local GPs and social care providers. Adapted or purpose-built housing is essential if disabled people and their carers are to play a full role in society.

I hope that we shall reinforce to local housing authorities the importance of the need to consult and work with special needs agencies and social services as they draw up proposals for the use of capital receipts.

The Bill is a crucial part of Labour's programme to tackle social exclusion. It will deliver long-term investment in our housing stock and new long-term employment prospects for many. I look forward to supporting it in its progress through the House.

6.14 pm

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid–Worcestershire): In many ways, this is rather a melancholy debate for Opposition Members. The roll call of former Conservative Members displaced by Labour Members includes many who would have spoken with passion about social conditions. Bob Hughes, who was referred to so eloquently by the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), David Nicholson, Alistair Burt and William Waldegrave are fine upholders of the tradition of one-nation Conservatism. Therefore, it is a slightly melancholy occasion, redeemed in part by the knowledge that my former colleagues have been replaced by so many fine speakers on both sides of the House.

I do not know how you recall your own maiden speech, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not look back on mine with particular pride, but every hon. Member who has made a maiden speech today has that privilege. We have heard a series of fine speeches.

I hope that the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes) will not take it amiss if I take her to task about one aspect of her fine remarks. She talked about the record of Conservative councils. My constituency is contiguous with Wychavon district council. Under the Conservatives, it took advantage of large-scale voluntary transfer of its housing stock. To their credit, the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties that sadly took control of Wychavon two years ago embraced the policies of the Conservative group and, as a result, at least 1,000 new units of social housing will be built in Wychavon, which would not have happened otherwise. That is the effect of the previous Government's policies. They were improving the condition of housing in Britain and Conservative Members have nothing of which to be ashamed.

I found the Liberal Democrat position on the Bill rather difficult to understand. The hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) seemed to say that it was not the right way to tackle the housing crisis. He preferred a housing investment programme based on need—the previous Government's policy—but said that he would support the Bill in any case. That is a typical example of trying to have your cake and eat it.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond). I am always interested in Runnymede, where my grandfather's ashes were scattered in the 1930s. My hon. Friend made a particularly eloquent speech, which addressed the hard questions about the Bill very effectively. He repeated the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) about the Bill being something of a smokescreen and not really telling the truth.

Capital receipts will still be locked up and will appear on councils' balance sheets when the Bill has taken effect. We are talking not about capital receipts, but about increased borrowing powers for councils. That is all the Bill is about; the capital receipts will still be there. I would dread having to explain that to special interest groups in my constituency. I shall probably be lucky enough not to have to do so, as my local authority is debt-free as a result of large-scale voluntary transfers, but certainly the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster) will have some difficulty explaining to the Council of Churches there exactly why, despite his promises to the contrary, capital receipts will not be released, but will still appear on the balance sheet. It will be a difficult argument for the Labour party to support.

I am glad that we are having this debate, however. The Bill is essentially a technical and enabling measure; its clauses do not even mention housing. The House gets too few opportunities to discuss housing, which, in my view, is perhaps the most important political priority for hon. Members on both sides of the House. It lies at the root of so many other problems involving health, education and crime.

I am depressed to hear Labour Members talking about the Bill as if the only answer to housing problems were more public money, more taxpayers' money and more borrowing. It is not the only answer. The previous

[Mr. Peter Luff]

Government showed that the use of private money has a crucial role, particularly through large-scale voluntary transfer and partnership with housing associations. There is also another dimension that has not been discussed—I shall not do so at length, because I would be ruled out of order. It is the attempt to reduce the demand for housing by, for example, keeping families together.

I am not one of those who think that we should accept as a given the level of housing demand in our society. It is a measure not only of increased affluence and aspiration, but of real social problems. The solution to some of those problems is not just to throw more houses at them.

I seriously hope that when the Government consider how to use the supplementary credit approvals mechanism that the Bill gives them, they will, when it comes to new building, concentrate their resources not on council housing but on housing association properties, for the simple and practical reason that—even though I have my own objections to council ownership of houses—by doing so, we shall get more houses.

Shelter said helpfully in its briefing note:

"New homes for people in housing need could be developed by housing associations or by local authorities. Housing associations are able to raise private finance, and therefore would be able to build more homes for the same amount of money. If housing associations are to build new homes, safeguards"—

I think that this will strike a chord with the Labour party—

"must be developed to ensure that the rents are affordable and that the homes are let to people in housing need, including homeless households.

Local authorities should have a role to play in determining spending priorities in their areas."

Shelter's way forward for new Labour involves no sell-out of socialist principles. If the Government decide to allow councils to spend the money on their own direct provision, such a route would provide more houses than might otherwise be so.

There is a problem with the Bill. The sum that it will release for new housing is relatively modest: about £5 billion phased over a period—I am not quite sure how long, but over, say, five years, which is about £1 billion a year.

I am one of those who attach importance to decent housing. I am therefore inclined to believe the Chartered Institute of Housing's estimate that the backlog of disrepair in the council sector amounts to about £20 billion. The Bill will not contribute a huge amount even to the sum that the institute estimates. Although I am sure that the Government will lay the blame at the door of the previous Government, they now have to solve the problem. If they try to pretend that the Bill will enable them to make a major contribution to solving the housing problem that they say exists, they will find that they cannot stack up the argument.

The Chartered Institute of Housing estimates that there is a need for about 120,000 new social units of housing each year for the next 10 years. It estimates that £5 billion will provide only about 140,000 new housing association homes, or many fewer council homes or, if all the money were used for improvement, only about 280,000 council homes would be improved. The Government must not make exaggerated claims for the Bill.

I am afraid that such a claim is typical of the Government—quick-fix mechanisms suggested as a solution to all our problems. We saw last week, under the Bill to abolish the assisted places scheme, the suggestion that the money could solve all the problems in our primary sector. It certainly cannot; more money will be needed. The Government say that the reduction in bureaucracy in the health service that they have pledged to achieve will solve the waiting list problem. That is not so either. In each of the three areas of education, health and housing, they will have to find new money if they are to make the impact that they say they want to make. There is no point in their pretending that the Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill will enable them to meet their real objectives.

I am particularly concerned about the lack of clarity in the mechanism that will be provided as a result of the Bill becoming an Act. I want to press the Front-Bench spokesman on whether future in-year or just historic receipts will be part of the programme. That is important. If the programme includes just historic receipts, new receipts will pile up and will not be used in any sense, even in the rather distorted, clever, smokescreen approach of increasing capital applications—supplementary credit approvals—on the back of the receipts.

The Government have a problem. They do not have enough money to do what they want. The receipts are inadequate to solve the problems that they say exist. Every pound that they spend through the Bill's mechanism represents increased public expenditure and will count against the public sector borrowing requirement, as the Deputy Prime Minister and the Labour party now accept, having denied it time and again in the past. Distribution mechanisms will have to be complex to overcome the uneven distribution of receipts. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon, the former Minister, said, there was some revelation of what they might be in the Minister of State's opening speech, but no clarity. The devil will be in that detail.

It will not do for the Government to try to pretend that there will be no impact on council tax payers. I see the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), on the Treasury Bench. In an interview in the *Financial Times* on 7 February, he said:

"This is not a no-cost option."

He went on to say that there would be

"an impact on council tax."

That is inevitable. The receipts are not lying idle in local authority coffers. They are generating interest payments that are used for a variety of purposes, such as keeping council tax down and improving services. Something has to give. One does not get something for nothing in this world—a point that I am afraid the Government have still not woken up to.

There is a fundamental unfairness about what the Government are planning to do through the Bill. The enthusiastic sellers of council houses—the ones that put in the most effort, the efficient local authorities—will not necessarily be the ones that benefit. We do not know enough about the mechanism by which supplementary credit approvals will be distributed. We have had only the most limited indication of how housing need will be taken into account in awarding supplementary credit approvals.

We know that there are better mechanisms; we already have them. The housing investment programme does precisely what the Liberal Democrats were calling for: it allocates according to need. In a funny way, it is the most socialistic way. Such a mechanism should be used. It is extraordinary that such great play has been made of releasing capital receipts—which the Bill does not—to conceal the fact that the bulk of money will still flow through the previous Conservative Government's mechanisms, such as the housing investment programme and the estates renewal challenge fund.

For my money, the best route of all is large-scale voluntary transfer. It is the real way forward that enables councils to concentrate on the enabling role, which I know Wychavon has taken to heart and is operating effectively in my constituency.

My worry is that playing with capital receipts could lead many local authorities that might have been thinking of going down the route of large-scale voluntary transfer to abandon their plans to do so. That would be a tragedy. LSVTs are the real way forward, to enable councils to get out of council housing and to fulfil their obligation effectively, by increasing the role of housing associations and the private sector in the provision of social housing in their areas. The Bill does not encourage housing associations. I hope that some of the conditions that are set subsequently will prove me wrong.

The Government should be doing more to promote the private rented sector. I fear that, if they decide to encourage council housing instead at relatively low rents, we shall not see the growth in the private rented sector that we ought to see, which would bring real increased mobility in the labour market and social benefits.

The Government must answer a host of key questions, which they have not done in the Bill. We must take an awful lot on trust. Exactly how will the phasing occur, and over what period—how much each year? Exactly what will be the methodology for distribution? If I understood the Minister correctly, we had a hint that one third of the money would be allocated according to possession of receipts and two thirds according to need. How will that need be measured? What will the money be spent on—repairs, regeneration, new build? Who will carry out those tasks—councils or housing associations? So much is unanswered. We must accept the inevitable passing of the Bill with those questions remaining unanswered. I hope that in his winding-up speech, the Under-Secretary will be able to give a firm undertaking that he will come back to the House with a firm statement on exactly the details that will be used in settling such important questions.

I must push the Government on the ring-fencing of the money for housing. We have heard before that the Government's priorities are education, education, education. The money from the Bill should be ring-fenced for housing, and I hope that we shall be given that clear assurance. We need more money for housing, although, as I have made clear, I should prefer it to be provided through other routes. I am sure that there will be huge pressure on Ministers from local authorities to allow them to use supplementary credit approvals on the back of receipts for other worthwhile social purposes. I should like an assurance that the Government will seek to resist that pressure.

I am not convinced by the Bill. It is a shallow deceit and I do not think that it deserves to become law. Although it will, the Government should be under no illusion. We shall keep them up to the mark on delivering the promises that they seek to make on the back of the Bill.

6.28 pm

Mr. Iain Coleman (Hammersmith and Fulham): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey), for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) and for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes) and the hon. Members for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) and for Taunton (Mrs. Ballard) on their interesting, intelligent and coherent maiden speeches.

I wish to place on record my thanks to the voters of Hammersmith and Fulham for electing me as the first Member of Parliament for the new constituency. My constituency is made up of the whole of the previous Fulham constituency and the five most southerly wards of what was previously the Hammersmith constituency. It has areas of considerable affluence and wealth, notably around the southern locations of the Fulham road and the New King's road, which are generously scattered with glitzy wine bars and expensive restaurants. However, there are also pockets of deprivation sitting beside this affluence which rank with anything anywhere in the United Kingdom.

It may come as a surprise to the House to learn that Hammersmith and Fulham is the 16th poorest borough in the United Kingdom, according to the former Department of the Environment's statistics. To demonstrate what that statistic means in practice, I shall cite some further facts that may also surprise some hon. Members.

In Hammersmith and Fulham, more than 35 per cent. of households are dependent on benefit; 38 per cent. of children have no parent who is working; 42 per cent. of pensioners have a serious long-term illness; 53 per cent. of primary school children are entitled to free school meals, which is twice the national average, and in south Fulham the figure is a staggering 75 per cent; and the death rate for males under 60 is more than 60 per cent. higher than the national average.

I have advised the House of those stark and disturbing statistics to nail the wide public perception that my inner-city constituency is a cosy London base for the chattering classes and City stockbrokers. The true picture is only too often one of a community bravely but desperately struggling against poverty, sickness, unemployment and deprivation.

I also wish to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley). For 18 years before 1 May, my hon. Friend represented in the House those residents living in the five wards I mentioned which were in the southerly part of the old Hammersmith constituency. During those years, my hon. Friend justly earned a reputation for being an excellent constituency Member. On behalf of my constituents in those old Hammersmith wards, I wish to place on record our thanks for his years of dedicated service to our community.

Some very distinguished current and former Members of the House represented the old Fulham constituency. Not least among this group was Lord Michael Stewart

[Mr. Iain Coleman]

who represented Fulham from 1945 to 1979 when he retired. Lord Stewart was a much-loved local figure who is still spoken of in Fulham with great warmth and huge affection. Martin Stevens was the Member of Parliament from 1979 until his untimely death in 1985. At the by-election that followed, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) was elected in a famous victory for the Labour party. I had the privilege of working for my hon. Friend in that by-election and have been pleased to work with him since on several issues. I am delighted that he has been appointed to his critical new job in the Government.

I also wish to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the last-ever Member of Parliament for the old Fulham constituency, Matthew Carrington. While it was inevitable that in our different roles—he as a Conservative Government loyalist and I as a Labour council leader—we would often publicly disagree, I also found Matthew to be courteous and honourable. He earned his reputation as a conscientious and diligent constituency Member of Parliament.

I shall briefly and somewhat belatedly congratulate the two professional football clubs in my constituency on their recent splendid achievements. Fulham football club has so often been threatened recently with extinction, but I am delighted to say that it is now safe and secure in its ancestral home at Craven Cottage. Doubtless, difficult negotiations lie ahead, but these are exciting times for Fulham. Recent developments have been a splendid way to end a splendid season for Fulham, which earned promotion to division two last season.

Congratulations are also in order for Chelsea football club. The *Evening Standard* recently castigated the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) for failing to attend the cup final even though his local side were represented. I am more than happy to defend the right hon. Gentleman against that scurrilous and disgraceful calumny against his good name, because Chelsea football club is, of course, located in my constituency. While my own footballing loyalty lies in London N5, I sincerely congratulate everyone at Stamford Bridge on their terrific achievement in winning the Football Association cup in such style.

The *Evening Standard* recently claimed that Chelsea had little local community support. Anyone who visited the constituency in the weeks before the cup final and saw the huge amount of decorations and bunting, or who witnessed the fantastic scenes outside Fulham town hall on the Sunday morning, when 100,000 people greeted the team and the Minister for sport, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), as they paraded the cup on an open-top bus will understand how off beam the newspaper's report was.

I shall turn briefly to the details of today's debate. I welcome the Bill because it demonstrates the Government's commitment to tackling homelessness and bad housing conditions. Since 1979, investment in public sector housing has declined by more than 70 per cent. Even in the current financial year, the overall housing budget has been cut by one third, which has led to a cut in London alone of approximately £285 million. The Government are correct to acknowledge that the existing distribution of set-aside capital receipts does not necessarily reflect those areas in greatest need, which must be our greatest priority.

I have already spoken about the high levels of deprivation in parts of Hammersmith and Fulham. The council-owned stock is some of the oldest in London, with a high percentage of properties built before 1945. Inadequate capital investment has left too many homes with inadequate heating systems, rotten windows, leaking roofs and other major defects. Some of the council properties in my constituency do not have internal bathrooms. All that is despite the fact that, under the five major criteria used to measure the performance of local authority housing departments by the previous Government—the quality of the housing strategy, the commitment to the enabling role of the local authority, the quality of housing management, the degree of tenant participation and the track record in delivering capital schemes—my local authority was classed in the top 20 per cent. in London. In other words, even if local authorities played the Tory Government's game, they were still starved of the necessary investment.

In Hammersmith and Fulham today, more than 6,000 households are on the housing register. Some 2,724 households are on the transfer list, including 367 that have a family member suffering from a serious medical condition or are statutorily overcrowded. Some 748 households are in temporary accommodation. That has led to the break-up of working-class communities that have lived in those areas of my constituency for generation after generation.

With a three-bedroomed flat in south Fulham now costing an average of £200,000, young people have been forced to move away from their families, friends and relatives, leading to much heartache and anguish. The private rented sector, where it exists, is entirely beyond the reach of ordinary working people. Therefore, many young families from my constituency have been forced to move east or west, or accept that they have no prospect of bringing up a family in decent housing conditions.

No one expects that we can reverse the situation overnight. People understand that reversing almost two decades of neglect will take time. However, the opportunities presented by the increase in capital investment mean that housing strategies can be revised to allow for a planned improvement to existing housing stock.

In the past few years, those council tenants fortunate enough to have any work undertaken have had to suffer as their homes have effectively been turned into building sites for years on end while work is done in small phases to match the small levels of funding available.

The Bill will change that and will bring other much-needed benefits. It will stimulate the construction industry and create jobs not only in the building sector but in the manufacturing and engineering sectors. I reiterate my total support for this welcome and much-needed Bill.

6.40 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I am pleased to welcome the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman), who spoke about his constituency with obvious affection and knowledge. I am sure that the House will look forward to his forthcoming speeches.

The hon. Member's references to Stamford Bridge and the comments of the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes) have taken us on an FA tour in these maiden speeches. I hope that that augurs well as the Government pursue the objective of bringing the world cup to Britain at the earliest opportunity.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston stated that she was looking forward to the establishment of the Imperial War Museum of the North, and, as I have the Imperial War Museum at Duxford in my constituency, I can tell her that it will be a much-valued and impressive addition to her constituency.

Turning to the matter at hand, I begin with two criticisms of the timing of the Bill. First, it is unfortunate that we are debating Second Reading when we cannot know the details of the consultation to which the Minister of State referred. It would be far preferable if the Minister were not explaining at the Dispatch Box how the measure is to work—we will then have to examine in Committee—and we could see the manner of the system that she is proposing and how the supplementary credit approvals are to be distributed, and for what purposes, during the consultation.

It would have benefited the House if it had been possible for Members to consult within their constituencies. I was able to talk to two local authorities within my constituency, but without the benefit of knowing some of the items about which the Minister told us; for example, the proportion of supplementary credit approvals related to the possession of capital receipts and the proportion to be related to need. That would have been relevant to the debate, but I was unable to discuss it with local authority representatives.

The devil is in the detail—as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) said—and, although we will come back to the detail in Committee, it would have been better to see some of it prior to Second Reading.

A number of hon. Members have referred to the Bill as a "technical measure". When I hear that expression from a Labour Government, I think that it would be best to check the implications of the measure carefully. The last "technical measure" that we debated in the House was on an issue of great constitutional significance, the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill. Here is another so-called "technical measure" which could have significant implications for my constituency and for council tax payers generally.

My second reason for regretting the timing of the Bill, and the haste with which the Government have published it, is that it would have been better for the House to debate the Bill in the wake of the Chancellor's Budget statement, rather than in advance of it. By reference to Ministers' statements, my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) illustrated that the Government have pledged to maintain departmental public expenditure totals. Yet Ministers assert with great confidence that the Bill proposes additional public expenditure through the supplementary credit approvals. The only consequence can be that those additions to expenditure will be compensated for during the next two years by reductions in expenditure elsewhere in the same votes.

The role of the House—and of this debate—in looking at those additions to public expenditure is to examine the merit of what is proposed against the merit of public expenditure in other respects. Yet the House is signally unable to do that. This is the worst kind of debate, in which one is invited to debate whether such a thing as additional housing investment is good or bad; by definition, it is good. However, the question is what is to be lost in consequence. To what extent will the burden fall on the taxpayer? To what extent will the cost be represented as a reduction in public expenditure in another part of the Department?

For those two reasons, it would be better to debate the Bill in two or three weeks' time when we have heard in the Chancellor's Budget statement the allocation that he is proposing to make to the Departments concerned. We could also see the consultation document that the Minister of State is proposing to publish soon.

My hon. Friends have stressed that we are talking not about a Bill which either mentions housing or is principally related to the release of capital receipts, but about a Bill which proposes to increase borrowing or spending by local government. When the Minister of State talks about one third of the supplementary credit approvals being related to possession of receipts and two thirds being related to need, she is illustrating that, in practice, two thirds of the additional spending will be unrelated to the possession of capital receipts. That is unless—I say "unless", because this is another point on which I am unclear—capital receipts that have accumulated in places where there is less housing need are pooled, or at least distributed to other parts of the country where there is greater housing need as reflected by the new provision indicator.

Will some authorities with greater capital receipts find that their credit approvals or capital expenditure approvals—and the subsidy that goes with some of those—are to be constrained artificially to allow other authorities to spend more? There is concern in my constituency that that is the intention of Ministers, and that a consequence will be that those authorities that rightly resisted the temptation to spend, and hang the consequences, will find that their thrift and prudent management have led to their being penalised, while other authorities that have spent without regard to the consequences will find that the Government are trying to bail them out.

I give credit where it is due. Questions were raised about what measure of receipts was to be used by the Government, and about whether there was a danger that the provision of credit liabilities might be used by Ministers to determine capital receipts for the purpose of the allocation of additional credit approvals. The Minister has said that that will not be the case, but that it will be related to accumulated reserve receipts. That is the better way to proceed.

Ministers are continuing to mislead the House on the implications of the Bill for public expenditure and taxpayers. First, I wish to refer to the consequences for the public sector borrowing requirement. If the authorities that have retained receipts have used them to repay debt or have invested them, they will lose the revenue accruing from the interest or will incur additional revenue costs arising from expenditure on additional borrowing. In either case, that will lead directly to additional Government expenditure and an increased public sector borrowing requirement.

[Mr. Andrew Lansley]

More significantly for my constituents, there will in either case be additional costs for the council tax payer. For example, South Cambridgeshire is a debt-free authority with a provision for credit liabilities balance of about £25 million, but none of that provision is backed by cash. If South Cambridgeshire were to be required, by one route or another, or were to choose as a consequence of the legislation, to spend more, the inevitable result would be additional borrowing.

At present, South Cambridgeshire gets a revenue of about £1.2 million a year notionally derived from its balances on the general fund side, so we can clearly see the revenue consequences of about £25 million. The £1.2 million is the equivalent of about £25 a year for a band D council tax payer. We can therefore get the measure of a council tax payer's liability if the whole of the capital receipts available to a local authority were to be spent.

Cambridge city is not a debt-free authority, but has set-aside receipts of about £25 million or £26 million. If those receipts were not available and additional borrowing were needed, the increase for a band D council tax payer would be about £35. I am concerned, because the impression has been given that there is a cost-free option.

It is important that the costs should be identified and attributed, as they are potentially large. The chief executive of Camden council, writing in the *Local Government Chronicle* some time ago, estimated that

"interest rates on reserved receipts would be financing around £400 million of local authority expenditure."

I suppose that that would be over and above current expenditure. It is not an insignificant additional cost.

I suspect that we would find that the costs were attributed back to the council tax payer in due course. Ministers said that the costs would not fall on council rents; if they are also not to fall on council tax payers, there will have to be compensation by way of revenue subsidy, in which case they will fall on the general taxpayer. The costs are large and will be attributed back to either the general or the local taxpayer.

I hope that the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston will forgive me for referring to a remark made in a maiden speech. She said that when council houses were sold and the receipts accrued to the local authority, the revenue loss from the council rents was not counted back to the local authority; but the revenue gains from the reduction of interest payments must also be taken into account. We cannot count one way only.

I have four criticisms of the Bill. First, it has been introduced before we have seen the detail of the Government's proposals and the public expenditure consequences. Secondly, it is being presented as a cost-free option, when in fact it is a back-door way of increasing public spending, even though Ministers said repeatedly before the election that they did not intend to do that in the next two years.

Thirdly, there is no such thing as a free lunch, and the eventual cost may be as much as £400 million. For my constituents, that could represent an additional £25 to £35 a year on council tax bills or a significant increase in general taxation.

Fourthly, clause 2 is objectionable in that it is a licence for local authorities to borrow imprudently for both capital and revenue purposes. It should be local authorities' responsibility to amortise their expenditure over a reasonable time scale and to make provision from within their revenue expenditure to meet the additional costs of borrowing or to expunge that borrowing over time. If we give local authorities an open-ended opportunity to borrow, without a reasonable time scale for reduction, it will further exacerbate their tendency to participate in the Labour party's common approach of borrow and spend.

On the basis of those four objections, I believe that the Bill should not be given a Second Reading.

6.55 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate, which marks a welcome and long overdue fresh start in housing policy.

I want to break with recent precedent by saying nothing whatever about football, other than that there are some wild proposals to bring Queen's Park Rangers home to Paddington basin; I am not an advocate of that, and it would come as something of a surprise to QPR—but who knows?

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman) on his excellent maiden speech. His constituents can only benefit from his passionate advocacy on behalf of them and their part of the city.

As we are discussing additional resources for my constituency, among others, I should declare an interest. I am currently, although probably not for much longer, a member of Westminster city council. Being a member of the Labour minority on that council and coming to the House as a Labour representative for part of that borough, with a Labour Government, is not an easy political place to occupy, so I shall be grateful for all the friends that I can get.

I speak on behalf of my constituents with pride, gratitude and humility. My constituency is an exciting place. *Newsweek* recently nominated London as the coolest city on the planet, and it undoubtedly had my patch in mind. From Portobello to Church street, we have the liveliest markets and hippest bars in town. We host the Notting hill carnival, which has its problems but is the largest and most successful street festival in Europe.

We are, however, an area of extremes. We span St. John's Wood, Lord's cricket ground, Madame Tussaud's and the zoo; yet a short stroll up the Grand Union canal, under the shadow of the Westway, brings one to some of the most acutely deprived corners of the city. They are, thankfully, no longer as deprived as in the days when the piggeries stood off Ladbroke grove and infant mortality reached 87 per cent. as humans and animals vied as to who lived in the greater squalor.

Perhaps we are also slightly better off than in the days of Rachmanism, which had a hold in my part of the city. For an evocative description of those days and of my part of North Kensington, I would guide hon. Members to Colin MacInnes's description of Napoli in "Absolute Beginners" which, as everyone knows, is Britain's greatest post-war novel.

Much of our corner of the city is still not doing so well. In the shadow of some of Britain's wealthiest streets are pockets of chronic unemployment and poverty.

Our communities are scarred by crime and drug abuse. Our black and ethnic minority communities, from or with roots in the Caribbean, Morocco and Bangladesh, among many other places, experience unemployment disproportionately, at levels two or three times higher than the general population.

Those people also experience the worst social conditions and bear the added burden of racial disadvantage and discrimination. Unfortunately, in a society that has become so unequal, diversity is not something that we can simply celebrate. Inequality turns diversity into a ladder of deprivation and, therefore, it is an inequality which our new Government must tackle.

Our housing conditions mirror and to some extent exacerbate the inequality that I described. At one end of the housing spectrum, we have some of the country's most expensive homes. A little further down the price ladder, are the private leasehold homes, where there are frequently chronic problems between leaseholders and management companies over repairs and maintenance charges.

I want to pay tribute to my two predecessors, Sir Dudley Fishburn and Sir John Wheeler. Sir Dudley Fishburn enjoyed a reputation as an assiduous constituency Member. Both Sir Dudley and Sir John put considerable effort into campaigning for the rights of leaseholders. It is not their fault that the previous Government bequeathed a continuing mess on leasehold reform. I look forward to the new Government dealing with that.

Our private rented sector is a long way from being the engine of a newly revived third force between owner-occupation and social renting, capable of meeting the needs of people requiring short-term housing to match labour market flexibility. Rents have been escalating to the point at which they are inflicting serious damage on settled communities, with rent increases of 25 and 35 per cent. not uncommon. Private sector rents are breaking the housing benefit bank and locking people into the poverty trap. Worse still, the combination of high rents and short tenancies is a major factor in homelessness. Figures that I have just obtained from Westminster city council, for example, show that the termination of lease or tenancy was the single largest cause of homelessness last year, affecting 876 households or one in five of total homeless applicants. I look forward to further discussions on how we can stimulate the private rented sector, but without those undesirable side effects.

Perhaps, it is in the council and former council stock that we face some of the greatest housing problems. There is severe housing need in north Kensington, where the relatively new tenant management organisation and many well-established housing associations are struggling to deal with the problems. I think for example, of some of my constituents whose cases I am dealing with, such as the family of 10 shoe-horned into a two-bedroom flat 11 storeys up a tower block.

In Westminster, the story has been far more controversial. Despite a well-researched level of housing need, confirmed most recently by surveys that found 12,015 households or 12.5 per cent. of the population in housing need, Westminster's ruling Conservative group chose to play politics for its own electoral ends. The result was the district auditor's conclusion last year that certain members and officers had acted unlawfully with regard to their "designated sales" policy at a cost to the taxpayer of £31 million. No doubt the House will hear more of that story in the coming months. When we do, we must at all times remember the victims: first, the council taxpayers who have forgone the benefit of that wasted £31 million; secondly, the many people who innocently bought council properties and found themselves unable to sell while at the same time being confronted with huge and unexpected service-charge liabilities, in some instances leading to homelessness and repossessions; and, thirdly, people in housing need who saw precious social rented property sold off. Since 1988, Westminster city council has sold more than 1,300 precious homes over and above those sold under the right to buy. I have no doubt that that issue deserves the attention of our new Government. For those reasons, I welcome the Government's close scrutiny of the local use of resources.

So, my constituency can certainly be defined as having housing need. Investment in the building of new homes or refurbishment of existing homes will be greatly valued. We will build on partnerships with the best housing associations. I commend the work done by Walterton and Elgin Community Homes as just one example of what can be achieved when local people work together with housing associations through the whole process of design, building and renovation.

We can and must look imaginatively at how the inner city can play its part in meeting the growing demand for homes—refurbishment of existing properties from all sectors and conversion from offices, as well as new build. We must ensure that the potential from our few remaining large sites is not lost. Locally, I think of Paddington basin and goods yard, which forms the border of my constituency. It offers exciting potential for affordable housing and leisure, as well as commercial use, but it cannot be allowed to become another enclave of luxury housing, spearing additional traffic on to local roads, 100 yd from north Paddington, but on a different planet.

The Bill is to be welcomed, since it gives us the opportunity to make real inroads into tackling housing need. It also deserves applause for placing housing in a wider economic and social context. The housing programme will create much-needed jobs. We must rise to the challenge of developing training schemes that can supply skilled labour to the construction industry.

Before I conclude, I must draw the attention of the House to one further substantial benefit that will accrue from our revived housing programme, which is the benefit to public health. The local health profiles for north Kensington and north Paddington point out that housing conditions are often used as proxy indicators of material deprivation when investigating the association between poverty and ill health. Overcrowding is associated with the increased risk of respiratory infections, gastro-intestinal infections, peptic ulcers, home accidents, chronic obstructive airway disease and increased mortality rates from coronary heart disease, lung and cervical cancer, as well as poor mental health. Our assault on housing need will, therefore, constitute an assault on poverty and ill health as well.

Finally, the housing investments released by the Bill will enable us to consider the infrastructure needs of our communities, such as child care, economic development, small business premises and so forth. In that way, the creation of new homes will go hand in hand with the

[Ms Karen Buck]

wider regeneration that so much of my constituency so desperately requires and which the Government were elected to deliver.

7.5 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): First, I must congratulate the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) on her maiden speech. I was pleased that she did not dwell for long on football, which I gather has been much touched upon in today's debate. She painted a clear and good picture of her constituency. While I also have a London constituency, she almost made me feel that her seat was more interesting and exciting than mine. She rightly drew attention to the way in which an area's appearance can be misleading—it can appear affluent on the surface, belying the pressures below the surface. I shall return to that subject in my remarks on the Bill.

I welcome the Bill, as do my colleagues on the Liberal Democrat Benches. The relaxation of the control over the use of capital receipts is long overdue. It is important that the Bill is enacted as soon as possible, to implement not merely a commitment made by the Government but one made by the Liberal Democrats. We want action now to tackle unmet housing need. It has been estimated that since 1989-90—the last year when receipts were reuseable—investment has fallen by about £5 billion, or 60 per cent. The consequences are only too obvious—a huge repairs backlog and a shortfall in the provision of new housing for rent.

In 1996, households accepted as homeless amounted to 121,990. Shelter has turned that figure into the number of people involved—350,000 people were homeless in 1996. That is the measure of the problem.

I said that an area's appearance can mislead us about its problems. My constituency has an image of being a green, leafy and pleasant suburban area in which to live. It, too, has unmet housing needs—needs which I hope that Bill will go some way to address.

If the Bill becomes an Act, as I am sure it will, I hope my local authority of Sutton will be able to take some action on three particular needs. The first is the need for self-contained accommodation for young people. The homeless persons unit in my local authority has on its list 100 young people in need of such accommodation. That may seem a small number when compared with other areas, but it is a pressure on those individuals, which needs to be sorted out.

Secondly, there is a need to provide accommodation for people with multiple special needs—often a combination of drug, alcohol and mental health problems. Finally, we also need housing for people with mental health problems, who often need a high level of support, but are not necessarily suited to group homes.

I asked finance officers in my local authority their estimate of Sutton's housing reserved receipts to get an idea of what might become available. The figure was £22 million. I hope that relaxation of controls will mean that my authority can fulfil its aims and ambitions for a single regeneration budget project in which it has been engaged for some time on the Roundshaw estate. It is a 1960s deck-access estate with many problems, and a great concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), in whose constituency it lies. We share a local authority, and thus an interest in the project's progress. I hope that unlocking receipts and making resources available will enable my local authority to tackle its repairs backlog with greater vigour and allow us to increase the number of advances to housing associations for new projects.

I was pleased by the assurances that we were given earlier about the need for a broad definition of housing in respect of expenditure under the Bill. Regeneration projects that involve housing encompass far more than the bricks and mortar of their buildings. We need to consider community safety issues and ensure that we take public health into account. We must examine energy conservation and how to deal with fuel poverty.

We must also consider accessibility in taking projects forward. As the Bill progresses, we must try to ensure that when social housing is built or renovated, the access requirements of disabled people are taken into account. In a written question a few weeks ago, I asked whether the Government would make a firm commitment to extend part M of the building regulations to cover all dwellings as a first step to extending access for disabled people. I hope that the Bill will at the very least allow the extension of part M to new buildings and to those that are being renovated with money spent under it.

I have a question about the wording of clause 1, to which those hon. Members who are fortunate enough to serve on the Committee will no doubt return. Having talked to people more expert than I on drafting Bills, I understand that it is intended as the device to enable redistribution of resources using supplementary credit approvals, but I do not understand how the wording achieves that intent. I hope that in Committee we can agree a more intelligible form of words.

Reference was made earlier to how the Bill will increase the public sector borrowing requirement. The previous Government used controls over capital receipts as a way of reducing the PSBR. I hope that the new Government will take the opportunity to review the Treasury rules on capital and revenue expenditure. Those of us who come from local government are only too familiar with separating revenue expenditure from capital expenditure in the way in which we account for them. The Government should look to do much the same to allow a more sensible attitude on how capital expenditure is raised to take forward much-needed projects.

The hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) attacked the Liberal Democrats for being critical of the Bill for not going far enough. However, he answered that criticism more adequately than I could have by going on to state that the Institute of Housing had identified a £20 billion housing repair backlog, which is a sum far greater than the resources that the Bill will unlock.

The Bill is welcome, but the House would be deluding itself if it believed that it does more than scratch the surface of housing need. It would be wrong for us to be under the illusion that the £5 billion that it releases will address the issues that Shelter and other organisations have campaigned about for so long. While we support the Bill, we will continue to urge the Government to do more.

7.16 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) on her evocative and passionate speech. Her experience as a Westminster councillor has made her an expert on housing and local government. I am sure that her constituents will appreciate that. I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech on this important Bill, which will benefit directly the lives of many of my constituents in Doncaster, Central by improving housing provision and generating much-needed jobs.

In making a maiden speech, it is customary to refer to one's immediate predecessor. I would like to go much further by paying a heartfelt tribute to Sir Harold Walker. He turned a Conservative seat into a Labour one in 1964, and served the people of Doncaster, Central loyally for 33 years. The people of Doncaster returned that loyalty with not only deep respect but true affection. Those feelings did not stem only from the fact that Sir Harold was an excellent constituency Member. Doncaster people are proud of Harold's national work. He was the longest-serving Employment Minister and piloted through Parliament the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974, the Employment Protection Act 1975, and the Equal Pay Act 1970. He reformed the Merchant Shipping Acts and introduced many other pieces of legislation that bettered the employment conditions of millions of working people. Sir Harold went on to occupy with great distinction the position of Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means for nine years.

Sir Harold's one shortcoming is his time-keeping, which is due only to the fact that he so enjoys talking to people that he is often delayed in getting to meetings. He takes jokes about it in good heart, and during the general election campaign he apologised to an assembled company for his delayed arrival by saying, rather proudly, "I am of course known throughout Doncaster as the late Sir Harold Walker."

During the general election campaign, I was reminded time after time by constituents of what a hard act to follow Harold would be. That was an unnerving experience, but Harold and his wife Mary did everything possible to help me during the campaign. They both worked tirelessly on my behalf; I could not have asked for more. Harold is not the tallest of men, and perhaps derives some pleasure from the thought that whilst he cannot tower over many people, he can at least tower over his successor.

Doncaster is renowned for its coal mining, its railways and its thoroughbred horse racing, which takes place on the Town Moor course. The Grand St. Leger, as I am sure hon. Members know, is one of the highlights of the racing calendar. There is one other fact about Doncaster that I hope will cause Ministers to look favourably on my constituency. In 1899, the Doncaster branch of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants sent a motion to the Trades Union Congress meeting in Plymouth. The motion called on the TUC to organise a joint conference with socialist and co-operative bodies to discuss Labour representation. Thus it was really in Doncaster that the Labour party was conceived. I am sure that hon. Members will be delighted to learn that the foundation meeting of the society was held at the Good Woman inn at St. Sepulchre Gate in Doncaster.

For me, being the area's Member of Parliament is a special honour, as I was brought up in Doncaster. My mother Valerie was a nursery school teacher, and my father Gordon a local head teacher—and, later, an elected representative on Doncaster council. Let me take this opportunity to thank not only the electors of Doncaster, Central for giving me the privilege of serving them, but the members of the constituency Labour party for campaigning for me in the recent historic general election, with its Labour landslide.

Yorkshire people are famous for the warmth of their welcome, and the people of Doncaster are no exception. Since the election, I have been overwhelmed by people's generosity and kindness, and I intend to repay that by doing my best to represent their interests in the House.

The Bill that we are discussing is about achieving two of the Government's important objectives, jobs and social justice. When it is passed, councils such as mine in Doncaster will at last be able to use some of the money that they have in the bank from the sale of council houses to modernise existing homes and to build desperately needed new ones. The consequent building and refurbishment programme can be used to provide much-needed jobs and training in Doncaster. I believe that the Bill will end 18 years of unremitting underinvestment in housing in Doncaster.

More than 5,000 people in my constituency alone are victims of Tory neglect, waiting for homes and worried about accommodation for themselves and their families. They deserve better, and the Bill will help them in their aspirations for a better life. Too many people in the Doncaster area are out of work, alienated and disaffected because they see little hope or future. The knock-on effects on society, in terms of crime and the growing drug culture, are frightening to witness.

Much of the drive for change that will be brought about by the Bill is due to our two Ministers' lifetime commitment to decent housing for all, and to local government. I understand that the Government will be looking to the construction industry to provide a significant number of new jobs and apprenticeships, but let me take that further, and ask whether the Ministers will visit my constituency to hear at first hand from a cross-section of representatives of my local authority and the voluntary and private sectors what Doncaster can do to assist in achieving the Government's stated aims—securing jobs and social justice.

Britain's housing problems cannot be eliminated overnight, and unemployment cannot be made to disappear immediately, but both difficulties can be alleviated through the regional development planning to which my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and his Ministers are dedicated. The Yorkshire and Humberside region could become the most exciting growth area in the country. From Sheffield to Humberside stretches a conurbation of great economic potential, where considerable growth could take place. Through the policies of my right hon. Friend and his Ministers, that growth will be encouraged, cultivated and fashioned to bring about a regeneration of Yorkshire and Humberside.

[Ms Rosie Winterton]

The Bill makes a start by tackling the basic issue of people's right to decent homes. I believe that, if we can sort that out, many of society's other problems can be tackled effectively. That is why I welcome the Bill, on behalf of my constituents in Doncaster, Central.

7.24 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I congratulate the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) on a fine maiden speech. From the sound of it, she is deeply rooted in her community in Doncaster, and her speech suggests that she will make a fine representative of her constituents.

I apologise if I am about to tread on convention, but may I also take the opportunity to welcome the Minister of State, the hon. Member for North–West Durham (Ms Armstrong), to the Government Front Bench? I do so particularly because it was she who frustrated my first attempt to gain entry to the House, back in 1992.

To the uninitiated, the Bill will seem very simple—it covers slightly less than a page in words of substance—but, as the Minister made clear in her opening remarks, it deals with a number of complex issues, although, given what has been said by Labour Members, some of them have failed to reach even them. Some of my hon. Friends have referred to those complexities, particularly the Bill's impact on the public sector borrowing requirement. That was mentioned in the eloquent maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) who, I believe, introduced the term smokescreen in relation to the Bill. He was referring to the Government's attempt to avoid, or smoke over, the Bill's impact on the PSBR and on local authorities. Some of my hon. Friends have also mentioned the potential impact on rents, which has been identified by Shelter.

Smokescreen, however, is a term that can be used about the Bill in another sense. A number of Labour Members have said that the Bill is a response to the Labour party's manifesto commitment to release capital receipts set aside from the sale of council houses and to use the money to improve council housing or to build new stock. The Bill does not do that: it is not about the release of capital receipts from the sale of council houses. It is a Bill for borrowing—a Bill which increases the ability to borrow, but does not refer to the release of receipts. As the Library makes clear in its research paper, although the explanatory memorandum states that

"this measure will 'allow the controlled release of reserved receipts from the sale of council houses', the detail on how this will be achieved is not in the Bill."

The Bill is not about releasing money set aside from the sale of council houses; it is about increasing borrowing—which is why it is all the more unfortunate that Labour Members have not said more about its impact on overall public sector borrowing and public sector finance in general.

The Bill is something of a smokescreen for another reason. As the Minister made clear in her opening remarks, there will be criteria on which the ability to exercise supplementary credit approvals will be judged. Reference was made to that being based on need. As yet, we do not have the definitions of the criteria and we do not know in detail how the process of deciding which local authorities will be able to benefit from the supplementary credit approvals will operate. It is unfortunate that the Government did not delay publication of the Bill until they had those details. If they had, we would have been able to consider the dual aspects of the Bill—the process by which extra supplementary credit approvals will be given and the definitions by which those approvals will be judged appropriate. As it stands, we have no idea how the approvals will be allocated to local authorities. It would have been preferable for the Government to wait until that detail was known.

For some time, many of us have found the operation of the definition of need by the former Department of the Environment as less than satisfactory. I know about Wokingham district council's concern at the somewhat arbitrary way in which the definition of need appeared to be exercised by that Department when deciding the standard spending assessment according to the agreed formula. It would have been far better to be able to scrutinise how those supplementary credit approvals will be identified and allocated before having to decide whether to support the Bill.

There are many other aspects to the Bill that I would have preferred to be at the fore. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) spoke about the extent to which we should not be talking simply about local authorities' ability to improve housing or to increase their housing stock, but about how that could be done in partnerships or by housing associations.

Several Labour Members have made heartfelt, passionate speeches about the condition of the housing stock in different parts of the country. It has long been my belief that the quality of the housing stock represents a record of failure over many years by local authorities to manage it. I do not believe that local authorities are very good at that job. One of my concerns about the Bill is the underlying assumption that money will be released primarily to local authorities to improve housing stock. I note that the Minister is shaking her head, so I trust that the Government will be looking at other engines to improve the housing stock or to build new housing. If that is the case, I am grateful to the Government.

A number of issues should have been debated today; instead, we have a short Bill. Many questions such as those raised by outside organisations such as Shelter about the treatment of in-year receipts remain unanswered. It would be far preferable to have answers to those questions before the Bill proceeds. Yet again, however, the Bill is being rushed through on the basis of honouring a manifesto commitment. It is palpable that that commitment will not be met because the Bill is about something different.

The Bill is not about releasing capital receipts from the sale of council houses, but about providing the means for extra borrowing. It is important that that is made clear and that the questions that my colleagues and I have raised are answered before we allow the Bill to proceed.

7.33 pm

Ms Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden): Thank you for calling me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to make my maiden speech. I would like to congratulate all those hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I hope that they will not contrast my contribution too unkindly with theirs. It is interesting that I should

speak after the hon. Member for Wokingham, or rather for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), because the last time we met was across a council chamber. In politics it seems that we move in a small circle, given that we have bumped into one another again.

I represent the constituency of Mitcham and Morden, which was formed in 1974. Until 1982 it was represented by Bruce Douglas-Mann. Some senior Members may recall that he was the only defector to the Social Democratic party who caused a by-election. Although he did not have luck on his side, because it was called just as the Falklands war commenced, he was an assiduous constituency Member whose memory is still held dear by a number of my older constituents. I understand that Bruce has fought a gallant fight against serious illness in the past few years. He has made a recovery, and I am sure that all hon. Members would wish him well in his continuing fight against illness.

For the past 15 years, the seat has been held by Dame Angela Rumbold, who had success at that by-election. She was my opponent in the elections of 1987, 1992 and more recently on 1 May. Hon. Members will gather from that that neither I nor my constituency are overnight successes.

It would be wrong for me to suggest that I had a great friendship with Dame Angela. In fact, I would be subject to retribution from someone of even higher standing than either you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, or anyone else in the House were I to do so. Nevertheless, I admired Dame Angela's single-minded determination to succeed, her work as a campaigner and her instincts for political survival, even if that meant bringing down her party as she attempted to do during the recent campaign.

Dame Angela's talents were recognised and she became a vice-chair of the Conservative party with particular responsibility for the selection of female candidates. Although I hold the hon. Member for Maidenhead in great esteem, she was the only new woman candidate selected for a safe Conservative seat. Dame Angela's other contribution was to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory in the Conservative party's submission to the boundary commission. I am sure that a number of my hon. Friends are particularly grateful to her for that work.

I was born and brought up in my constituency, where I have always lived. It is the only seat for which I ever sought selection or which I would ever want to represent. Although it is a place that I hold in great affection, I would not attempt to suggest that it is the most beautiful or dynamic constituency in the country. Although the constituency is home to 474 acres of Mitcham common and the beautiful Morden park, which is well looked after by the National Trust, and while we can boast the oldest cricket green in the world, it also marks the end of the Northern line. I hope that that service will improve under the new Government.

Mine is a constituency of two halves—those who regard themselves as Londoners and those who think that they live in Surrey. It is a suburban seat to which people come to raise their families and where they generally enjoy living. On behalf of those people, in particular the one in five households who live in council accommodation, the 200 families in significant housing need each year who have no chance of being housed, and the many people who work in the building industry either in small firms or as self-employed, be they plasterers, bricklayers or carpenters, I commend the Bill to the House. I also commend it on behalf of those young people in my constituency who desperately want a trade and who want the opportunity to make their future better.

I assure the House that the Bill is well supported by my constituents irrespective of whether they are owner-occupiers, tenants or leaseholders. It is with some incredulity that we have witnessed my council, which raised £56 million from the sale of council houses, being unable to afford to make the most basic improvements—the installation of central heating or new windows—available to the vast proportion of its tenants.

My tenants associations of Lavender, Glebe Court and Phipps Bridge wrote on numerous occasions to their previous Member asking her to support their attempts to persuade the then Government to use capital receipts to improve their homes.

My constituency consists of half of the London borough of Merton, which has amassed considerable amounts of money from the sale of council housing. The respective Labour and Conservative councils have always worked efficiently to sell what we had to benefit our voters in the best way. We appreciate that we will not have access to all the funds currently held by the council. We are happy with the two thirds:one third split proposed in the Bill, which suggests that the formula will be based on need and the amount of money that each council holds. Nevertheless, we believe that our one third will represent about £20 million over a five-year period.

We welcome the use of special credit approvals, which will not cause problems in the council's funding as a whole. We also welcome the revenue subsidy, which means that rents will not escalate. Our tenants will therefore not be forced into the benefit trap, whereby they consider it better to remain on benefit than in work because of those increased rents—increases made to make possible the improvements to their homes.

In the six weeks since my election, I have heard great speeches on great things about which I know little. Politicians of all parties in every area of public life are motivated by the people they meet and the problems they experience. As someone who has spent the past 16 years working in public housing, five of them as chair of my local housing committee, I know what the Bill will mean to all those elderly tenants on the St. Helier estate in Morden, who have worked all their lives and fought in a world war, but whose council cannot provide them with the central heating they need during the winter.

On a positive note, I have seen how well we can use the money from the sale of council houses. When the Conservative Government allowed us a capital receipts holiday we tore down some of our worst tower blocks and provided homes with gardens. This may be a local government finance Bill, but the stuff it is made of is central heating, double glazing and housing with gardens. It is an opportunity to improve the life chances of all our constituents and I commend it to the House.

7.40 pm

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): In embarking on my maiden speech, I congratulate those for whom the ordeal is recently over, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Ms McDonagh). It is a far, far better thing that she has done than I might achieve in the next few minutes.

[Mr. Peter Bradley]

The traditions of this House are daunting—not so much the shuffling and sneezing in the Lobbies as the fact that this is the mother of parliaments. Fox, Pitt, Keir Hardie, Nye Bevan and others of their stature have sat, stood and spoken in the places that we now occupy. I should also mention the three hon. Members who in the last Parliament represented the communities that now make up the constituency of The Wrekin, which I am proud to represent.

For many years, John Biffen, now Lord Biffen, was held in great esteem by his colleagues on the Conservative Benches and by the then Opposition Members; he was also held in great affection by his constituents. As befits a man of his record, he has now gone, if not to a better place, at least to another place. The hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) represented for some years part of my constituency—the villages of Shifnal and Albrighton. He is a great advocate for Shropshire, even if he would like the county better if it could be further detached from Europe. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Mr. Grocott) is a true champion of his constituents. He is respected on both sides of the House and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made an inspired choice in appointing him his parliamentary private secretary.

This is a crucial debate. Everyone recognises that we are living through a housing crisis of monumental proportions, although one would not get the impression, listening to Conservative Members, that they had presided over that crisis for almost two decades. It is ironic, albeit interesting, that they pray in aid Shelter—an organisation which vigorously campaigned against the policies of the Conservative Government for 17 or 18 years. As this is my maiden speech and I am therefore obliged to be charitable, or at least uncontroversial, I have to concede that it is refreshing to hear them now admitting the existence of a housing problem, even if they are quibbling about the solution.

There is a housing crisis. It damages the lives of individuals, families and entire communities throughout the country. Taxpayers spend millions of pounds on the costs of homelessness—on temporary accommodation and the associated benefits and social services that people in poor housing receive. Hundreds of thousands of construction workers are kept unemployed and on the dole when they could and should be at work, building or restoring homes for those who need them. The crisis is a testament to the record of the Conservative Government over the past 18 years. The record of the new Labour Government will depend to a large extent on what we do now, which is one of the reasons why the Bill is so welcome.

The Bill will be as welcome in the semi-rural constituency I now represent as in the inner-city ward that I represented for more than a decade. That ward is no more than a few hundred yards from the Palace of Westminster—Millbank ward, in which Millbank tower is situated, which is where our great election victory was planned. In the 10 years that I was a member of Westminster city council—it is important to my reputation to stress that I was a Labour member of that council—I saw what the Conservative local authority that out-conservatived all local authorities could do through housing and other policies to decent, honest, ordinary people. I saw the community I represented decimated by the dogma of Tory housing policy and I know how important it is to my constituents—then and now—that this Bill and future measures be enacted.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) was somewhat extravagant in claiming that her constituency was a microcosm of the universe. I make a more modest claim for The Wrekin: the whole nation is contained in my constituency, from the factories at Hadley where GKN builds Warrior armoured vehicles for the British Army and all the British Telecom telephones on our streets, to the fields where Shropshire farmers produce some of the best beef and sugar beet in England. I have to admit that I am not sure how one judges one bit of sugar beet against another, but no doubt I shall discover the finer points of sugar beet production during the life of this Parliament. My constituency contains market towns such as Shifnal and Albrighton, Newport and Wellington; old mining communities, many of which originated in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice); the Army base at Donnington and the RAF base at Cosford; and hi-tech industries in new business parks all over the constituency.

We in The Wrekin enjoy all the nation's strengths, but also many of its weaknesses. Recently, the Henley centre reported that our district is sixth out of 459 local authority areas in terms of economic dynamism, but 296th in the poverty stakes. That is because The Wrekin is the nation's low pay capital: unemployment is low, if we trust unemployment statistics, but the price that too many people have to pay for a job is low-paid, part-time or temporary employment when full-time and decent, secure employment is what is needed. Employment rights are inadequate and business also pays a price because low pay goes with low skills. Not long ago, I met a business man who benefited from the incentives to locate and expand his business in The Wrekin, but who is now transporting it, lock, stock and barrel, to south Wales because he found that when he wanted sophisticated and improved production he could not find the necessary skills in the local economy.

In Shropshire, 13,000 people earn less than £3 an hour; and 3,500 earn less than £2 an hour. It is hardly surprising that 2,500 families in Telford are living on family credit, which tops up low wages and is paid for by taxpayers. Others have mentioned the real lives of the real people we represent, but I want to tell the House about one of them—a man I met in Arleston in the Wellington area during the election campaign. He is a young man with a young wife and family, who starts work at 5 am and returns home at 6 pm, six days a week. He works a 78-hour week for £150 take-home pay. He has to do that to keep his family and to pay his mortgage, because he does not want to be one of the 800 people a month who lose their homes after having fallen into mortgage arrears. He, and thousands of people like him throughout the country, will look forward to the introduction of a statutory minimum wage.

Then there is the young single parent whom I met in Newport, who desperately wants to work to keep her child but cannot afford to when the only child care available to her costs £3 an hour. She earns £3.60 an hour. She will benefit from the Government's commitment to helping people off welfare and into work.

Then there is the pensioner from Albrighton who was left in pain when his routine operation was cancelled three times because the local hospital could not provide him

with a bed. I am glad to say that I received a letter from him this morning telling me that, although his recuperation was painful, at least he has now had the operation. He can look forward to a national health service being restored by a Government who understand the value as well as the cost of public services.

Next there are the 1,250 children between the ages of five and seven—38 per cent. of the children in The Wrekin, which is well above the national average—who are learning, or trying to learn, in overcrowded classrooms. At last, they will get the opportunity to learn, to grow and to prosper. The one in three people who have been victims of crime in the past two years will feel safer on their streets and in their neighbourhoods because the Labour Government will not just talk tough on crime, but act tough.

As for business in The Wrekin, it awaits with hope and a great deal of anticipation the private-public sector partnership for improving public transport infrastructure which will at last restore the InterCity link to Shropshire. That link was severed in the softening up process leading to privatisation of the railways, which in turn has cost our local economy a great deal in lost inward investment.

Our farmers, too, and the 800 people whose jobs were jeopardised in the past year by the BSE crisis look forward to the new Government's actions with anticipation. They also look forward to the lifting of the beef ban and a resolution, at last, of the BSE crisis. Their neighbours in the countryside are looking forward to the Government arresting rural decline. That will begin with the private sector restoring the lost bus services; rural post offices must be protected, too; and GPs must be encouraged back into rural communities.

Much that has happened in the first month of the new Labour Government has given us great encouragement and hope for the future—not least the ministerial announcement on 19 May, in an Adjournment debate, that minerals planning guidance note 3 will be urgently reviewed. It relates to opencast mining, and the review is probably more eagerly awaited in my constituency than anywhere else in the country. Once in place, it will provide relief to the communities of Muxton, Lilleshall and New Works Village, where lives and properties have been blighted for so long by the threat of opencast mining. I hope that the review will be swift and conclusive.

I also urge Ministers to take a look at planning policy guidance note 3 on social housing, because the planning system, besides housing policies, can deliver social housing of the type that our communities desperately need. Planning can be a great engine of social progress—a fact which I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister has not overlooked.

In my district, 2,553 households are in housing need, and the wait for housing allocation is an average two miserable years. Fifteen million pounds is needed this year for repairs alone, and over the next 10 years about £45 million in further investment is needed to restore our housing stock.

The problem is as great in rural areas as it is in urban areas. It is just as widespread in market towns as in the more densely occupied parts of the constituency. Communities cannot renew themselves unless they provide homes for the next generation: they wither and die. Just as the community that I used to represent in Millbank has struggled long and hard, and with some success, against Tory housing policies, so rural communities have had their challenges to face.

It is time for the Government to act on housing. Council coffers are said to contain £6 billion; 100,000 families are in housing need; there are hundreds of thousands of unemployed construction workers on the dole. It does not take an Einstein to solve the equation and realise that those unemployed workers should be put back into employment, with money in their pockets to spend in the high street, making a contribution to the local economy and broadening the tax base.

Many brick producers in my constituency will directly benefit from kickstarting the sector and enabling it to build homes for the people who need them. There will also be a net saving to the taxpayer. The Bill will help to redress the balance: alongside the right to buy we must restore the right to rent. That is only common sense and common decency, qualities which have been in short supply these past 18 years. But they are the qualities that won us the recent election.

Let us recognise that without a permanent roof over our heads we have nothing and no chance in life. So let us give those without homes and those struggling to bring up their families in substandard housing both hope and life opportunities. This Bill begins that process, and I have been privileged to make my maiden speech during the debate on it.

7.55 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley). I agreed with almost none of what he had to say, but he said it eloquently. I am sure that we shall hear many other speeches of equal eloquence by the hon. Gentleman in the months and years ahead.

I pay tribute at the outset to what I take to be the genuine motives of Her Majesty's Government in this matter. Labour Members have said repeatedly throughout the debate that their aims are to increase employment and to improve housing. No one in my party desires anything other than those two results.

The problem with the Bill has been well described by my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), who was misdescribed earlier as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), a perhaps more famous participant—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): Not so attractive, though.

Mr. Letwin: No, indeed. My hon. Friend described the Bill as a smokescreen, but I think that the problem goes deeper. The Government's motives, although genuine and noble, will not be realised by the Bill. Three kinds of naivety are at work here. This is a subject which has been debated in the House, by Governments and among learned people on both sides of the political divide for about 25 years. It is not new territory that the Government find themselves occupying today.

The first type of naivety is the belief that, to the extent that the receipts are indeed used by local authorities for housing, they will create long-term sustainable

[Mr. Letwin]

employment. On the contrary—if Ministers and Labour Members knew rather more than it appears that they know about the housing industry, they would be as aware as Conservative Members are that the effect will be to create what Labour Members themselves sometimes call a boom and bust culture. A one-off release of large sums for building houses will engender a large expansion of the construction industry, but only briefly—to be followed almost inevitably by an exaggerated contraction of the industry. It is that cyclical pattern which has caused so much difficulty for those who have attempted to remain in that industry through hard times and good. Far from creating additional sustainable employment in that industry, the Bill is likely to lead to over-expanded ambitions and subsequent bankruptcies which, if anything, will tend in the long term to reduce sustainable employment in the industry. There are all too many historical examples of that phenomenon—with which officials, if not Ministers, are only too familiar. If the Government were to seek advice from their officials on the matter, I have no doubt that they would receive advice to that effect.

The second species of naivety with which we are dealing concerns the fact that, alas, much of the money will not be used for housing. Although it may be specified that the receipts, if released, must be directed towards housing, as always there will be a large degree of substitution. Following the release of those receipts, local authorities will no doubt find themselves spending in other quarters the money that would have been spent on housing. The Government will be surprised in due course, and they will be obliged to explain to the House why there is so great a discrepancy between the variously reported £5 billion or £7.5 billion of receipts and the amount actually spent on increased funding of housing.

The uses that each local authority makes of that money will depend on the authority. I fear that in the case of some authorities, especially those controlled by the more extreme variants of the Labour party, some of the uses will alarm the Government and may be advantageous, from a purely political point of view, to Opposition Members. I suppose that, from that point of view, I should welcome that likely development, but from the country's point of view, it will not be advantageous. It will not contribute to employment or to the solution of our significant housing problems.

Alas, a third species of naivety is also at work. The one thing of which we may be confident is that although the receipts will not generate the degree of sustainable employment envisaged, and although much of them will not be spent on housing, they will certainly be spent. The history of local authorities over many decades bears out the fact that a local authority that is permitted to spend extra money will always do so. As Conservative Members have frequently said—and it will not surprise Ministers—when that money is spent, the public sector borrowing requirement increases.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) offered the Government a marvellous device for resolving the problems that would otherwise occur: creative accounting to reclassify the public sector borrowing requirement into two categories—one caused by current spending, the other caused by capital spending. I presume that the hon. Gentleman imagined that by that means Liberal Democrat magic, allied with Labour perseverance, would lead to a sudden disappearance of the problem of the vast increase in the public sector borrowing requirement in the current financial year.

Alas, even if the Government—contrary, I suspect, to the advice of all those concerned with the probity of public accounts and contrary to the dictates of the Treasury—were to reclassify in that way, they would find that there is an economic reality that when debt increases, interest costs increase. Regardless of whether the extra cost is borne in one year through expansion of the PSBR or is borne gradually over time in the form of increased interest charges, it will be borne.

That extra cost will have to be borne by something else. It will have to be borne by the reduction of other parts of the departmental total or of the global total, in which case other programmes—perhaps those dear to Labour Members—will need to be cut, with consequent effects on, among other things, employment. Or it will have to be borne by an increase in taxation which, such being the way of the world, will not be free of employment consequences. Every time taxation increases, either consumer spending or industrial profit declines, threatening jobs.

The Bill, although noble in its motivation, proves on examination to be a tissue of naiveties. It will not result in a stable increase in employment in the industry to which it is ostensibly devoted. It will not result in an expansion of housing on a scale approaching that which is considered to be the obvious outcome by those who have not examined the position. It will result in a great increase in the public sector borrowing requirement, which will come to bear on all of us in the form of reduced expenditure elsewhere, perhaps on even more urgent services, or in the form of an increase in taxation, which will inevitably reduce employment.

The Government would do well to reconsider the Bill, if theirs is the noble motive of trying to increase employment and to improve housing. Some other Bill, better fashioned, would serve that purpose better.

8.4 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this important debate.

I will start by thanking all those in my constituency who worked so hard to ensure that, after almost 50 years, Stroud returned a Labour Member to Parliament, and all those electors who, having thought long and hard about what was in the area's best interests, voted for a better future. In the process, they overturned one of the safest Conservative seats in the south-west on an unprecedented wave of enthusiasm for Labour's message. I fully intend to do everything possible to live up to the trust that they have placed in me and to fight for fairness and social justice in everything that I do.

As well as being a Labour Member, I am proud to represent the Co-operative movement in this place. As one of 26 Co-operative Members of Parliament, I am sure that we shall make a considerable contribution. It is important to recognise that the Co-operative party is a sister party to the Labour party and that, although we share similar objects, we maintain our separate identities. We shall take every opportunity to pursue co-operation in all its

different forms and we look forward to the early introduction of a Bill that will encourage co-operation in all those forms.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Roger Knapman, who represented the Stroud constituency for the past 10 years and in so doing achieved the reputation of being "a good House of Commons man," rising to the office of Government Whip. He may have been a person of relatively few words in this place, but he was always known for his mordant wit and his ability to present his case clearly and coherently. He was magnanimous in defeat on the morning of 2 May, which I greatly appreciated, and I hope that I shall be able to follow him with dignity and good sense and serve the area to the best of my ability.

There is one respect in which I would not want to emulate my predecessor. In his maiden speech, he warmly welcomed the introduction of the poll tax. With hindsight, I feel that that did not get him off to an auspicious start. However, in due course it did his chances no irreparable harm because he served as part of the Government.

I cannot leave my tributes without mentioning two former Members of Parliament for Stroud. Sir Anthony Kershaw, who represented Stroud for an impressive 32 years from 1955 to 1987, developed an enduring and endearing relationship with local people, based on his reputation as a highly conscientious Member of Parliament. He also managed to be a high achiever in the Commons, gaining ministerial office and becoming an acknowledged expert in the sphere of foreign affairs. I have been the recipient of good advice from Sir Anthony, for which I was very grateful.

I also pay due regard to the last Labour Member of Parliament for Stroud, Ben Parkin, who served in the 1945 Parliament. On his election, he restored hope and a sense of renewal to the people of Britain after a period of undeserved misery and pain. He went on to represent the interests of his constituents with characteristic commitment and gained widespread respect as a valued parliamentarian. He had a lifelong belief in the need for peaceful international relations, based on a foundation of moral leadership, and in the need for socially useful, productive and fulfilling employment, especially for the young. Those remain laudable objects today, and Ben will be long remembered by many of my constituents for giving a lead to social and moral renewal. London Members will know that Ben went on to represent a seat in the capital for many years and that he is best known for his exposure of Rachmanism.

I am not only extremely proud to represent my constituency but extremely fortunate to represent such a beautiful part of the country. I am not alone in describing my area as such, and the Stroud district has a special resonance for all who know it. It is not just a beautiful place. Over the centuries, Stroud has seen remarkable change. For so long associated with the wool trade, it was at the forefront of the industrial revolution and retains its integral interest in and support for manufacturing. Hon. Members may be surprised to learn that some 40 per cent. of the work force are still involved in manufacturing—a much higher percentage than elsewhere in Gloucestershire and a significant proportion in relation to the whole country. That was brought home to people last week when we experienced the tragic loss of some 200 jobs at one of our major firms, Lister Peters in Dursley.

Stroud's dependence on manufacturing means that we have a vested interest in recovering this nation's secondary base. If we are to succeed in that, we must move away from too great a reliance on the low-wage, low-security jobs that have become all too prevalent in my constituency. Given the Government's priorities of investment and educational opportunities, there could be no better test bed than the Stroud constituency. In wishing the Government every speed in their venture to rebuild this country, the people of Stroud will welcome any initiative that strengthens our manufacturing and engineering base. I am sure that that is the case on both sides of industry. For the reasons that I explained earlier, it is especially important to my constituents.

My constituents are lucky to live in such stunning countryside. The constituency consists of Cotswold Edge and the Severn Vale. It has two major market towns: Stroud in the north and Dursley in the south. There are four other market towns: Minchinhampton, Nailsworth, Berkeley and Stonehouse, where I live. It has been my great pleasure to represent Stonehouse over the past decade as a town, district and county councillor. As an apprenticeship for this place, I am sure that the experience is second to none. In addition to the market towns, there is a rural hinterland with sizeable parishes such as Cam, Cainscross and Rodborough, as well as many smaller villages and hamlets too numerous to mention.

The strength of our area is in its diversity. However, we face an increasingly uncertain future. Like the rest of the country, Stroud has suffered from a free-market approach to planning, which has seen the hearts of towns and communities eroded by the interests of developers and the restraining of local government powers to act in their communities' interests. At this very moment, developers are preparing to build numerous houses on some of our most precious green-field sites, ignoring the needs and wishes of local people and failing to take account of the economic and environmental consequences of their actions. I have referred more than once to the "locust" tendency of taking up more and more of our precious countryside and the "lemming" effect of failing to question whether that is right or fair. I intend to initiate a full debate on the whole development process so that we can genuinely move towards a more sustainable future with much more carefully thought-out strategies.

Stroud has achieved some notoriety of late, with an intervention by the former Secretary of State for the Environment, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer). In visiting my constituency over the past week through the columns of various publications, he was rather rude about Stroud district council's attempts to put forward proposals for consultation in its local plan. His views were at best unhelpful and his words have done nothing to prevent the attack by developers. If he had spent more time talking to developers to try to restrain their ceaseless attack on those green-field sites, it might have been more helpful than having a go at what we are trying to do in Stroud. As I am not allowed to be controversial in my maiden speech, I shall return to that matter later.

Hon. Members may wonder what all this has to do with a debate on capital receipts, but I understand that I am allowed a certain licence in my maiden speech and I shall return to that issue later. I wish to discuss three other matters before coming to the capital receipts implications for Stroud and the rest of the country.

[Mr. David Drew]

First, my constituency has suffered from a financial and democratic deficit. Services have declined and council taxes have risen at both county council and district level, despite a rapid increase in population caused by a standard spending assessment system that is rigged against us. My colleagues from Gloucestershire and I intend to turn that round so that we can provide better education, good transport and a proper community infrastructure.

The second issue concerns the campaign to save Standish hospital from closure. I have long supported the campaign and hope that, as a Member of Parliament, I can bring it to a successful conclusion. To my constituents, Standish exemplifies what the NHS is all about. I have pledged to continue to battle to keep the site and have already begun discussions to ensure that that happens.

The third issue is more complicated. It involves my horror at the increase in poverty and social exclusion in my area. Many hon. Members, particularly Labour Members, may question that comment, as deprivation in their areas may seem more commonplace. However, there are surprisingly large pockets of poverty in Stroud. Like many other areas of the country, we have problem estates. Just as worrying is the increased incidence of rural poverty. While we know much about urban poverty, we have yet to grasp what it is like to be poor in a rural area. Problems caused by poor transport, lack of jobs and absence of shops and services are all too prevalent and are all wrapped up in social isolation. It may seem a paradox that anyone can feel hopelessness and despair when living in a rural idyll, but the aphorism, "You can't eat the countryside" sums up the reality that far too many people face.

Against that background, I have little difficulty in moving on to the substance of the Bill and I am particularly pleased to make my maiden speech in a debate on local authority capital receipts. I have a long association with, and specific interest in, housing issues. The restriction on the use of capital receipts from the sale of council houses has long caused anger and resentment in all housing authorities. My authority has more than 6,000 properties, many of which are in a good state but some of which need repair or bringing up to date, such as the installation of central heating or better windows. It is vital that that should be done and anything that can help it on its way will be welcomed.

Like many other areas, Stroud also has a high percentage of poor quality housing in both the private and the public sectors. Much of it dates back to pre-1919, so it is in considerable need of repair. There are therefore good reasons why local authorities should be able to use those capital receipts. It is a disgrace that while homelessness rose inexorably under the Conservative Government, a major source of funding was proscribed. Had those moneys been made available over time, I wonder how many families and individuals who have suffered the inequity of homelessness would have been housed without having to face the despair and uncertainty of waiting in bed-and-breakfast accommodation or even worse. Stroud has managed to avoid the use of bed-and-breakfast accommodation, apart from on rare occasions. On the positive side, we have an estimated £5 million in the form of cashback which, if used sensibly, could make a real hit in attacking poverty and deprivation.

As democratically elected bodies, local authorities should have the right to decide how they allocate their funds. Too often, the Conservative Government's first response was to restrict councils from exercising their authority. In so doing, they not only sought to frustrate councils' genuine wish to provide good quality services but created a complexity in local government housing finance which few people would purport to understand. That is especially true in relation to capital receipts. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will aim to cut through the complexity so that it will be easier for local authorities to understand the mechanism and, accordingly, for electors to measure their performance.

Several Conservative Members referred to debt. No one is in favour of local authorities delaying repayment indefinitely or failing to make it a priority, but it is not beyond the wit of local authority treasurers to take responsibility for that, in liaison with their councillors. It is wrong and counterproductive to impose repayment of debt, without giving discretion. Rather than saving money, that can lead to a loss of revenue in the long run, through the absence of housing provision and other creative uses of receipts.

Councils should be allowed over a period of time to use their capital receipts from the sale of council housing. It would be foolhardy for authorities to try to use all of the receipts in one go, or even to frontload the receipts, no matter how desperately they wanted to tackle housing problems in their area. The impact on rents and council tax would be unacceptable, as Conservative Members have made clear. I know that the Government will take that carefully into account in their calculation of subsidy support and subsequently of SSAs.

Instead of rushing into the use of their receipts, local authorities should work out the best schemes possible, preferably through a partnership approach, to maximise the value accruing from the receipts. There will be a temptation to restore the cuts of one third in capital which the previous Government imposed, but that must be resisted in the short run, at least.

I wanted to know from my hon. Friend the Minister how the release of capital receipts will affect supplementary credit approvals. I am happy with her response, and even more pleased that there will be a period of consultation on the way in which the details of the scheme will operate. That takes account of the prerequisite for fairness to authorities such as Stroud which have managed their capital assets so successfully over the years.

In conclusion, I return to the link between the growth of social housing and the possible attack on the countryside. Seeking the building of extra social housing may seem to be at odds with my earlier plea that we must end the destruction caused by green-field development, which hangs like a pall over much of my constituency. There is, however, no contradiction. I am not against development per se: I am against the imposition of unbalanced and unacceptable development.

For example, in many cases the only housing that is needed in a particular place is more social housing. It is my contention that if local authorities were given back the resources to provide more social housing, that could prove helpful to those of us who favour greater constraints on development. If social housing will be required in the future, more capital should be available in the public

sector to initiate that development, thus restoring the balance between public and private sectors. I heartily support the views of my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley), who said that we must look again at planning policy guidance PPG 3, which would be a means of achieving that objective.

Too often, the only way in which social housing can be commissioned at present is on the back of much larger estates through planning gain. That is, at best, undesirable.

I support the Bill. It is clearly set out to deal with the problems of homelessness and of renovation and refurbishment, and it provides a helpful link with welfare to work schemes. Most of us went into politics to try to raise the quality of life of those whom we represent, and the Bill will do much to further that aim.

8.23 pm

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): I congratulate the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I am grateful for the opportunity to make mine in such an important debate.

My interest in local government goes back many years. For the past 16 years, I have served as a member of St. Helens council and have held several positions, including chairman of education and of economic development and, for the past four years, leader of the council. I have also served on the local government consultation finance committee. I therefore have some knowledge and experience of the problems faced by local authorities.

Before I deal with the problems of local government finance, I shall say a few words about my friend and predecessor, John Evans, and my constituency, St. Helens, North. John was first elected to Parliament in 1974 as the Member for Newton, which at the time was one of the largest constituencies in the country. Following the boundary reviews of 1983, the seat disappeared. John was soon selected and elected for the new seat of St. Helens, North, which he held from 1983 to 1997.

John has many friends inside and outside the House. He has built up an excellent reputation as a constituency Member of Parliament and as a fighter for the rights of the people of St. Helens. He will also be remembered by his political colleagues for his work on the national executive of the Labour party, where he helped to rebuild the party and its finances. I know that John takes most pride in his role in leading the national campaign to stop the takeover of Pilkington by BTR. That successful campaign kept the world headquarters and its plants and jobs in St. Helens.

John was a hard-working Member of Parliament, with many achievements to his credit. He was proud to represent St. Helens, North, and the people of St. Helens, North were proud to have him as their Member of Parliament. We were delighted when John's efforts and hard work were recognised and rewarded with his elevation to the other place. I take this opportunity, on behalf of the people of St. Helens, North, to thank John for his 23 years of hard work and to wish him and his wife, Joan, every success in their new roles.

St. Helens is an industrial town, built on the back of the coal, glass and chemical industries. It is famous for its glass technology, its Beecham's powders and, of course, its rugby team. However, the town's industrial past has left it with its share of problems—large areas of derelict land and a low skill base.

The local authority has been at the forefront of building a partnership between the private and the public sector. That partnership is now regenerating the town. Despite the loss of more than 10,000 jobs in the past 10 years in the coal, glass and chemical industries, new industries and jobs have been created. Recently, it was announced that a multi-million pound indoor ski centre would be built in the Haydock part of my constituency.

The local authority has managed to raise education and training standards above the national average, and has reclaimed half the derelict land to which I referred. That has created an improved environment, new development sites and new jobs for the people of St. Helens. The partnership has achieved that success despite the fact that St. Helens does not receive its fair share of national resources. It has been able to maintain its spending on education and social services only by becoming one of the most efficient and effective local authorities in the country, and by cutting other important council services and increasing council tax above the national average.

I put on record my support for today's announcement of the release of capital receipts held by local authorities. It is a national scandal that local authorities have been forced to hold such capital receipts in their bank accounts and that construction workers have been left on the dole, while many families in towns such as St. Helens are forced to live in substandard housing that is often cold, damp and lacking in basic facilities.

Many communities and local authorities will welcome today's announcement, which will allow councils and the private sector to begin the job of bringing homes up to a modern standard. It will also encourage the recruitment and training of the long-term unemployed, as part of the Government's welfare-to-work scheme.

Hon. Members have said that the Government's proposals go no way towards dealing with the problems that exist in the United Kingdom. I am sure that that is true. My local authority needs more than £100 million to be spent on the modernisation of its pre-war stock, and it has only £12 million in capital receipts. It normally has a national allocation of about £3 million a year to spend on those houses. It does not, therefore, need a genius to see the scale of the problem that exists in my borough.

Today's announcement shows Labour's values and it shows what Labour will do when resources become available. I am sure that the announcement will be welcomed by many people who will enjoy the benefits of today's allocation being released. I am hopeful that not only shall we have a radical review of capital receipts, but we shall have a radical review of SSAs. Such moves will focus attention on the unfairness of the present SSA system.

The Government were right to release some of the capital receipts held by councils. I was pleased to hear of last week's commitment to improve education standards by cutting class sizes. However, if we are serious about giving our communities equal opportunities in terms of receiving good-quality council services, we need to review the SSAs as well as the capital allocations that local authorities receive.

The Government should not be sidetracked by vested interests. Communities such as St. Helens should not have to wait for ever for a fair grant system. St. Helens is aware that the new Government have inherited a financial crisis.

[Mr. David Watts]

We are not expecting a larger local government cake, but we are expecting a fair slice of that cake to be given to towns and cities such as St. Helens.

I shall give the House a few examples of how unfair the present system is. St. Helens and Westminster have the same population. St. Helens receives £583 of grant per person, whereas Westminster receives £995 of grant per person. Each Westminster secondary child receives £983 more grant than each St. Helens child receives. Each child at risk receives £19,000 more grant and each elderly person receives £418 more grant. Those figures are in addition to other aspects of the SSA system which are unequally unfair to my constituents. Such figures are staggering and other local authorities—Wigan, Barnsley and Rotherham, to name but a few—face similarly unfair treatment.

St. Helens does not mind receiving less grant than poorer areas, but Westminster has less unemployment, fewer problems of poor health, less poverty and a higher average income. Those facts speak for themselves and demand change. Until such changes are made, the people of St. Helens will continue not to receive their fair share of national resources, they will face further cuts in council services and they will face higher council tax bills than they should. More important, they will not be able to invest in their communities in the way that they wish and as they are entitled to do.

I welcome the Government's commitment to reviewing local government SSAs and I welcome today's announcement. The people of Great Britain have made the right choice in electing a Government who will invest in their future.

8.32 pm

Ms Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this important debate. I am particularly happy to be able to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, North (Mr. Watts) on his first contribution, and I am sure that we shall hear many more contributions from him.

Garston is positioned to the south of most of the well-known Liverpool landmarks, and it is a mixed residential and industrial constituency. It includes some of the docks and the old industrial heartland of the city, much of which was devastated in the early 1980s. Were I to list the factories and employers who have gone from my constituency, it would be a depressingly long list. Liverpool, however, is irrepressible and the people are of the best sort. There are encouraging signs of hope and renewal, especially in the single regeneration budget partnership areas of Speke, Garston and Netherley valley.

Garston's borders are logical on three sides—the River Mersey, the green belt at the southern edge of the city and the M62. The border on the fourth side runs almost down Queens drive, but not quite. My constituency is perhaps the most socially and economically diverse of all the Liverpool seats and as such, it has always been a volatile swing seat. It used to be a true marginal, but it has lately swung strongly to the Labour party. Although I might like to think that that phenomenon coincides precisely with my appearance on the scene, in fact it predates it. Garston's progress to an 18,000-plus Labour majority has been aided enormously by the slow death of the Tory party in Liverpool.

Whichever of the two—the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) or the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague)—who are vying to be Leader of the Opposition is successful in grabbing that poisoned chalice, he might profitably reflect on how his party can ever again be relevant to the people of my constituency. If he finds an answer, he may well be on the way to renewing his party. As recently as 1979, Garston was held by the Conservative party, but now it is a very distant third.

Garston contains some of the most desirable and expensive housing in Liverpool, in the Woolton and Allerton areas, and has the highest proportion of owner-occupation in the city, but it also has huge peripheral estates in Netherley and Speke and some very poor private terraced property in Garston, some of which is unfit for human habitation. Unemployment is well above the national average and all indices of deprivation show Liverpool to be very poor—one of the poorest regions in the European Union. Large swathes of my constituency suffer the problems associated with unemployment and poor housing—poverty, ill health and crime, to name just three—yet the community spirit is strong.

Throughout the constituency, community-led groups and businesses have sprung up to try to tackle the problems—whether by way of credit unions taking banks to the estates, such as those in Netherley and Speke, long since abandoned by commercial institutions, or by way of employment and regeneration initiatives, the list is almost endless. SMART, ARCH, CREATE, VANT—I could go on for many hours about the good work of those organisations in my constituency, but time is short. Suffice it to say that the capacity of the people of Garston constituency to fight for improvements and life chances for themselves and their families is endless and inspiring.

Despite the efforts being made, however, regeneration is never an easy task. Some basic problems must be tackled by the Government, and I shall address one of the most basic problems in my constituency, which the Government can and should tackle—the provision of adequate housing. First, I want to refer to three of my predecessors—Eddie Loyden, David Alton and Sir Malcolm Thornton. All have represented part of my constituency and all left this House on 20 April or 1 May.

Many hon. Members on both sides will recall Eddie Loyden as a modest man, but a determined fighter for his constituents and for his strongly held socialist beliefs. A seafarer and a docker, his fight on behalf of the families of the victims of the MV Derbyshire typifies him. I know that hon. Members will join me in wishing him a long and active retirement.

David Alton was another respected representative of the Grassendale ward of the Garston constituency. He has now gone to the other place where, I have no doubt, he will continue to speak up for Liverpool.

Sir Malcolm Thornton, who left this House at the behest of his constituents in Crosby rather than of his own volition, was the Member for Garston between 1979 and 1983, so I ask the indulgence of my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Ms Curtis-Thomas) if I make some remarks about him. Our paths crossed in 1992, when I fought Crosby for Labour while Sir Malcolm Thornton fought it for the Conservatives. I came, as I recall, a rather glorious second. I recall seeing Sir Malcolm again on

2 May 1997 after his shock defeat. He was as courteous and gracious in defeat as he had been in victory five years previously. I am sure that all hon. Members wish him well in his future endeavours, whatever they are. I certainly wish all my predecessors well.

Something else all my predecessors and I share, apart from having had the honour of representing Garston, is that we have all made maiden speeches about housing. That illustrates how, across party and through time, the issue has been so important in Garston. It still is.

Council housing in Liverpool is, in the main, very poor. Of more than 45,500 dwellings, almost 27,000—over half—are structurally substandard or in poor condition. Much of the stock is ill maintained, some of it designated defective under housing defects legislation, and some which is defective has not been designated. The local authority estimates that £700 million is required to bring the stock up to standard. The standard in Liverpool council housing for heating is one gas fire. Damp, disrepair, mould growth and the consequences for the health and well-being of the occupants are endemic throughout the stock. Those consequences include needless and difficult additional burdens for thousands of my constituents who already have many other burdens to bear.

I know about this, not just because 80 per cent. of my constituency case load relates to housing problems, but from my experience before the election as a solicitor in private practice in Liverpool, specialising in housing law. During my time in the House, I want to achieve an improvement in living conditions for those in the poorest housing. Before my election, I used the courts—civil and criminal—to achieve that for those who sought my help. Now I shall use legislation. However improvements are achieved, they are long overdue.

In her maiden speech in 1945, Bessie Braddock—a well-known Liverpool Member of Parliament whom I feel I can cite because she had a connection with Bennett street in Garston—told of families of 10 in her Liverpool, Exchange constituency who were forced to live in overcrowded conditions. At my first constituency surgery after the election, I was consulted by a constituent who complained that she and her family of 10 were overcrowded in their home in Speke, yet she had no immediate prospect of adequate housing. Little seems to have changed in Liverpool.

We must do something about that state of affairs. That is why I welcome and support the Bill. It begins to tackle the housing crisis that has been worsened by the dogma of the Conservative party and bequeathed to the nation. It makes provision for the Secretary of State to take into account capital receipts set aside for debt redemption when issuing supplementary credit approvals. That sounds dry and technical, but it will get some of the £5 billion of locked-up set-aside capital receipts back into the equation for rebuilding and rehabilitating social housing. The measure is long overdue, delayed purely by the previous Government's prejudice against social housing.

In Speke and Garston, in Netherley and Childwall valley, we need repairs and improvements to houses—and soon. I welcome other initiatives that the Government are supporting, such as establishing housing companies and mechanisms to involve tenants. I believe passionately in the strength, sense and ability of ordinary people to shape and transform their lives, given half a chance. I have a particular belief in the capacity of Liverpudlians to do that. Their solidarity, community spirit and adaptability are demonstrated every day on the estates to which I have referred. Let us ask them what they want to do, and listen to the answers.

Landlords, even social landlords, do not have a monopoly of wisdom—certainly not in Liverpool. The best of them would not claim to. I hope that, with the backing of the Government, determined to make a difference in Speke and Netherley, things will change. The Bill is a good start. Perhaps we can then ensure that the next hon. Member for Garston—who, I trust, will not come to the House for many a long year—will be able to choose a different subject for his or her maiden speech.

8.42 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Ms Eagle) on her passion and commitment to her constituents and her obvious commitment to politics. I also commend all the other maiden speeches that we have heard today.

I am indebted to the voters of Norwich, North. The 1992 election was a tense fight, which we narrowly lost by 266 votes. We overturned that safely this time. I am grateful to the voters for their support. Norwich, North comprises the northern reaches of the fine city of Norwich and parts of Broadland—Sprowston, Taverham, Thorpe Marriott, Drayton, Hallesdon, Old Catton and Thorpe St. Andrew. People there face similar problems to those in other parts of the country—problems of access for the disabled, low pensions and housing problems. They have spoken for a change, a secure future and a Labour Government.

Previous tenants of my seat—although the boundaries seem to move wider still and wider—were Labour peers George Wallace and David Ennals. Patrick Thompson held the seat for the Conservatives from 1983. I shall not elaborate on their contributions. Many hon. Members on both sides know about them. They were revered and are still thought of as hard-working Members of Parliament. Patrick Thompson established a base for science and technology here in the Palace of Westminster. Coincidentally, my last job before 1 May was as dean of biological sciences at the University of East Anglia in Norwich.

The people of Norwich have experienced major upsets in recent years: shoe factories have closed; there have been job losses at Her Majesty's Stationery Office; the Nestlé chocolate factory closed; a library burnt down; new ventures such as the Playhouse theatre are struggling to survive; and large areas where factories once stood are derelict. Even the Norwich Union, which we hear about in the papers, can no longer offer every school leaver a place, as it once did. The recession came late to Norwich, but it certainly came.

The city has 53,000 houses, 37 per cent. of which are council owned. Some 33 per cent. of those are pre-war, with 1,500 needing immediate modernising. Unless we have more capital investment, not all the pre-war houses will reach modern standards—without outside toilets and with modern kitchens and bathrooms—until 2011. By that time, 6,000 houses built between 1945 and 1964 will need major investment. It is a disgrace that these days we have to give out such facts.

[Dr. Ian Gibson]

Heating systems are deteriorating faster than we can replace them and many houses do not have full central heating. For years, we have been able to install central heating only for those with a medical priority or for the elderly. That pattern is repeated across the country. Some 5,000 past-war houses need new windows.

Norwich's housing stock is in better condition than that in many metropolitan areas. That is because of good management by successive Labour councils. I am proud that Norwich city council is still controlled by Labour, with not a Tory councillor. That is a great reflection of the vision and determination of Labour politicians throughout the years. The majority of our tenants want to remain with the council. In contrast, many in the Broadland area find that rising rents are becoming intolerable.

Visiting sophisticates from other parts of England have often come to Norwich, chiding us with comments such as, "They can't read, they can't write, but they can drive tractors." Have those people ever produced a son who can teach the Chancellor of the Exchequer to understand and talk with authority about post-neoclassical endogenous growth theories? Norwich has been running the country.

The future of the outskirts of Norwich depends very much on a large research park, where science and technology will flourish. We are trying to build on a model similar to the research triangle park in North Carolina, where massive private sector investment associates with a dynamic public sector grouping of research establishments. We hope that it will result in a successful scientific and economic venture—a true synergy.

The project is developing with the University of East Anglia, where research gradings have risen since the last research assessment, the John Innes Institute, the Central Science Laboratory, the Institute for Food Research and the British Sugar Laboratory. Some 1,700 researchers and teachers investigate links between diet and cancer, undertake genetic engineering of plants and look into the molecular biology of human diseases. Those institutes are soon to be joined by a new hospital.

I should like serious consideration given to the siting of a food standards agency in such a galaxy of talent. To add to that we have Colman's food factory, famous for its drinks and its mustard. Norwich City football club can now boast Delia Smith on its board. We certainly take our food seriously in Norwich.

I want to pay tribute to the people of Norwich. The work that I have been engaged in for several years has had support from charities for carrying out cancer research, particularly from the Big C Norfolk and Norwich charity and the Bryan Gunn Childhood Leukaemia Appeal. Bryan Gunn is the Norwich City goalkeeper. With the help of people who can ill afford it, those charities have raised money to help our research at the Francesca Gunn laboratory, where we are looking for new diagnostic techniques for cancer detection and for new cures. It says a lot for people that, when times are hard, they are prepared to give to charity and help the development of new cures. We owe a great deal to people who live in poor housing, but are prepared to help others.

I conclude with a few comments about general housing needs in Norwich. Although they are not so different from those in other parts of the country, I wish to raise one or two specific points.

Before the right to buy was introduced, Norwich city council had 26,000 houses. It now has 19,500. We urgently need to tackle overcrowding, problems with neighbours and the long waiting lists for transfers. Those complaints are made time and again in my surgeries. Requirements for the elderly, special needs housing and homelessness have also been mentioned today.

Norwich has £6.5 million in capital receipts. If £2 million of that were released, we could increase modernisations and carry out external repairs, re-roofing, repairs to lifts and improvements in security. That would make a start, but we need a rolling programme for at least 10 years. Tenants would certainly have better heating and lower heating bills.

If another £1.2 million were released, we could start building in association with housing associations and private builders. It is all rather exciting. It starts the ball rolling and shows the direction in which we are moving. Constituents in Norwich would like that to happen and that is why they support the Bill. It offers a pathway for change and it leaves me rather excited.

8.50 pm

Mr. Anthony Colman (Putney): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in the debate. I also congratulate the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today, including my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Garston (Ms Eagle), for Mitcham and Morden (Ms McDonagh) and for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson). I shall return to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden in a moment.

I particularly commend the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North. With a name such as mine, I am obviously pleased by the fact that he mentioned mustard and the money that was raised by what people left at the side of their plates. I also endorse his support for Norwich City.

As a Norfolk boy, it is nice to see Norwich once again returning Labour Members. Norfolk, North, where I grew up, always returned Labour Members in the 1940s and 1950s, and I look forward to that happening again at the next election.

Turning to the Bill, I speak from a background of two different boroughs—Merton and Wandsworth. Until very recently, I was proud to serve as leader of Merton council for some six years and I am pleased to represent in the House the residents of Putney in the borough of Wandsworth.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden was perhaps unable to refer to her great success as chair of the housing committee of the London borough of Merton. During her years in that post, the Labour group, working with local housing associations, was able to build more than 3,000 units of social housing. Obviously, during that time we were blocked from using the capital receipts, and much more needs to be done.

In Merton, particularly in Mitcham and Morden, there is great housing need. The Bill will enable the people of Mitcham and Morden as well as those in Wimbledon to benefit from the same standard of housing as 3,000 of them have received under a Labour council since 1990.

In contrast, the London borough of Wandsworth has a housing waiting list of some 7,000, although its capital receipts amount to millions of pounds. I say that because I am unable to trace from either the chief executive or the director of finance the exact sum. They seem to be a little reticent about that. I know that some of those receipts have been used to repay debts, but money is still available. That money should be spent on addressing the great social housing needs of the borough and the equally great need for repairs.

Many of us know of the tremendous campaign in Wandsworth to sell council houses. To those who wish to buy their council houses I say God bless them. If people wish to do so, we should let them get on with it. However, I draw the House's attention to my constituent who received a 25-year mortgage at the age of 78. Now, at the age of 86, she faces huge bills, large service charges and large capital charges amounting to more than £10,000. That is not what was meant by the right to buy. Councils encouraging people in that respect should draw a line somewhere. The block where my constituent lives needs repairs, including a new roof and new windows. It should be one of the first calls on the capital receipts that will be released through the Bill.

At my surgeries, I meet many leaseholders who are concerned about what they consider to be the mis-selling of their properties to them. I am not suggesting that Wandsworth has done anything illegal. The council stayed on the right side of the law, as was established by the Audit Commission before Christmas, so I am not making any allegations of that nature. However, many unhappy leaseholders and tenants in Wandsworth are looking to the Bill as a way by which the money that has been put into council coffers can be released to pay for repairs and new social housing.

Next May, the residents of Wandsworth will have the chance to decide the political balance of their local authority. Obviously, I hope that they will take account of the Bill and realise the difference between Labour and the Conservative policies and attitudes towards repairs and new social housing.

Merton and Wandsworth are very different councils. One is Labour and one is Conservative. On 1 May, the British people decided which way they wished to go and the Bill is an important part of their decision.

8.57 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I am grateful for the opportunity briefly to intervene in this important debate. When I served on the housing committee of a London council serving residents in Paddington, we had 24,000 tenants on our books. One has only to say that number to realise how difficult it is for any local authority with large numbers of tenants to manage them as effectively as can a smaller and more focused range of housing associations and private sector providers that can give a better quality of housing provision.

Although a new Labour Government were indeed elected, as the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) pointed out, they promised to privatise, to follow our policies on privatisation and the private finance initiative and, indeed, even to accept private funding of the railways. The Bill's thrust goes entirely against that logic and the logic of what the previous Government did, which the electorate endorsed time and again.

When a local authority gets involved in business, it never does so that well. When it gets involved in negotiating the purchase of land, in construction contracts for new building or in the management of housing estates, it is highly unlikely that it has the ability, the management or the focus to do the job as effectively as the private sector. Instead of encouraging an increase in the public sector borrowing requirement, we should be encouraging more investment by housing associations in order to get the extra housing that we need.

We should also be encouraging new investors in housing. The previous Government ensured that the rent laws became more even handed and fairer, and enabled great expansion. *[Laughter.]* The Under-Secretary of State laughs, yet the previous Government ensured a great expansion of the private rented sector, which had been in terminal decline under the previous regime of protected rents. We should build on that by encouraging new investors such as pension funds to get directly involved in providing social housing—if necessary through an element of subsidy, just as we do on some transport lines. We should follow through the logic of involving the private sector in housing rather than returning to the local authority control that many Government Members have mentioned.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Why does the hon. Gentleman see the situation as an either/or option? The council that I led over the past six months took both routes. We worked with the private sector and housing associations, but sought to improve our own stock. Of the 6,000 homes that are still council run, half of them have no central heating and only a fifth have double glazing. For every £1 million released under the Bill, about 250 of those homes can be fitted with double glazing and central heating. That will be good for energy efficiency, jobs and business, but it will also improve the tenants' quality of life. Why does the hon. Gentleman want to deprive those tenants of benefiting purely on the dogmatic ground of wanting only to go down the private route?

Mr. St. Aubyn: Of course I do not want to do that. I want the quality of housing—whether it is in the public or the private sector—to be improved. The point is who is best able to do that. If the Bill were limited to improving tenant accommodation, it might make a little more sense. In privatising parts of the country's assets, the previous Government became involved in improving those assets and their management before they were passed to better management in the private sector.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Does my hon. Friend recall the very sad and poor record of many Labour local authorities on maintenance and repair of council housing and Labour's bitter opposition over many years to the right to buy? Are his fears about what the Bill might lead to based on those memories, which seem to have been passed over or easily forgotten by Labour Members?

Mr. St. Aubyn: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We have heard Labour Members comment on certain Conservative councils and how they tried to do their best for their tenants and their tenants' children in their areas, but we must not forget that the Labour Minister Herbert Morrison, who formerly ran London

[Mr. St. Aubyn]

county council, talked of building the Tories out of London. It is no coincidence that one of the people behind the Bill is a descendant of Herbert Morrison. I fear that the same thing that went on then is going on today, and we shall oppose it.

9.3 pm

Mr. Paul Truswell (Pudsey): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this very important debate.

There is a saying that goes: "When Pudsey is strong, Yorkshire is strong, and when Yorkshire is strong, England is strong." Admittedly, the comment was about cricket. After all, Pudsey is the birthplace of Herbert Sutcliffe, Len Hutton, Ray Illingworth and many other famous Yorkshire cricketers. Following the general election result on 1 May, I like to think that that statement carries a certain topical political resonance.

Labour took the seat of Pudsey for the first time in its history after a Conservative reign of 75 years. My predecessor was Sir Giles Shaw. I have noticed with some humour that some new hon. Members have felt obliged to engage in a certain amount of psychological gymnastics in order to pay tribute to their predecessors. Thankfully, I have no need of such contortions. Sir Giles served the constituency extremely well for 23 years. He held ministerial office and, at one stage, he was even a pretender to the Speaker's throne. His most immediate, disarming and deceptive characteristic was his size. He was, as they say, vertically challenged. I suspect that not even his best friends would claim that he was the personification of the principle that small is beautiful. That fact used to cause some merriment when we appeared together. There were the usual predictable quips about little and large, and one wag even suggested that the swing to Labour in Pudsey was 13.8 inches rather than 13.8 per cent.

What Sir Giles lacked in physical stature, he more than made up for in the presence that he brought to his role as a Member of Parliament. He was a compassionate, middle-of-the-road, one-nation Conservative. I realise that many in the present Conservative party regard those descriptions almost as expletives, but I hope that Sir Giles does not. If he does, I can seek refuge in the protection of the absolute privilege of the House. I wish Sir Giles a long, happy and, above all, healthy retirement.

I shall not claim, as other hon. Members have done for their constituencies, that Pudsey was God's best attempt at creating a garden of Eden in England's green and pleasant land. However, it is an attractive part of the world. Many people choose to move there and few choose to leave. It is also the gateway to Ilkley moor and the Yorkshire dales. The millstone grit from which much of the area is built is a reflection of its character. Its communities are fiercely proud and independent. The constituency contains Pudsey itself and the towns and villages of Farsley, Calverley, Horsforth, Rawdon, Yeadon, Guiseley and Hawksworth.

Pudsey constituency also sports one or two household names besides its cricketing greats. Harry Ramsden's, for example, is my corner chip shop. The company started from a tiny wooden shack 50 or 60 years ago. The shack is still there, and the company has exported fish and chips to the known universe. Across the road, is the Silver Cross pram factory. It is probably fair to say that many hon. Members were transported in Silver Cross prams—my hon. Friends by their parents, and Conservative Members, no doubt, by their nannies. Talking about being pushed around, I note that several Opposition Members have taken to calling new Labour Members voting fodder. All I can say is that we do not feel half as chewed up as the many hundreds of Tory candidates whom we defeated on 1 May.

The Bill that we are discussing is very important. It is about investing in our communities, which have sadly lacked such investment in the past 18 years. We need investment in child care and education, and the money released from the abolition of nursery vouchers and assisted places will start that process. We need investment in our NHS, and releasing money from the internal market and enabling the private finance initiative will start that process. Incidentally, I look forward to the rebuilding of Wharfedale general hospital being on the list of such projects.

The area that has perhaps been most starved of investment is public housing. My council tenant constituents believe that the previous Government not only neglected them, but almost despised them. The Bill will help to reverse that neglect. It will start the essential process of renewal. I should perhaps declare a personal interest. I was brought up in a council house and my parents still live in the same house 44 years later. They, like many millions of ordinary people, are dependent on good, affordable rented housing. They prefer—whatever Opposition Members may say—to live in housing that is publicly owned and administered by the local authority.

In 1979-80, Leeds city council was building 1,200 properties a year. Today, as a result of the previous Government's policies, it builds none. A partnership with the voluntary sector provides some decent affordable rented housing, but nothing like enough to fill the huge void left by the reduction in council house building. In 1979-80, the council received permission from the then Labour Government to invest £100 million at today's prices in its housing stock. That figure has fallen by more than 85 per cent. to about £13 million this year.

Some 20,000 council homes have been sold. That is good news for those who have been given the ability to purchase their home, and one would not want to decry that. However, the properties sold tend, unfortunately, to be the best stock whose rents were used to subsidise the poorest stock remaining in council ownership. It has been estimated that about £750 million is needed by Leeds to put its housing stock in order. At the current rate, that would take more than 60 years, and would not take into account any problems emerging during that time.

When I became a councillor 15 years ago, I was scandalised by the fact that it took a month or five or six weeks to house homeless people. That period has now tripled or quadrupled, and only those with the highest social and medical priorities stand any chance of getting the housing that they need. Linking investment to welfare to work will have other advantages. It will provide the dignity and income of a job, and will enable people to walk down their street, look at local housing and say proudly, "I did that."

My hon. Friend the Minister of State, who has left the Chamber, is a keen student of Leeds' trail-blazing schemes, such as the one-stop shops that she visited a few

days ago. The city council also has a pioneering community building firm, which takes long-term unemployed people and deploys them in building valuable community facilities—the sort of objective we have in mind in releasing capital receipts through the Bill. The community building firm has done some excellent work in my constituency in Horsforth and Yeadon, and it could be a model worth looking at—or, if one will forgive the pun, worth building on.

The Bill offers real hope, but it is not a magic wand—none of my hon. Friends is claiming that it is. It will not repair overnight the neglect of the past 18 years, but it will help stop the rot. On behalf of my constituents, I welcome it.

9.12 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I begin by welcoming the Under-Secretary and the Minister of State to their present positions. We have heard some fine maiden speeches from Members on both sides of the House. At times, there has been a sporting theme, but we began with the speech by the hon. Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey), who showed her great knowledge of her constituency. She also paid a proper tribute to William Waldegrave, a distinguished Member of this House who gave great public service at the highest levels of government and—as she generously acknowledged—gave great service also to his constituents.

The hon. Member for Bristol, West is clearly familiar with many aspects of the housing problem in Bristol, and I know that Bristol has a high level of housing need. The previous Government extended the rough sleepers' initiative to Bristol. I wish her well in addressing those problems and in representing the constituency which she described as having the second-largest electorate after the Isle of Wight.

The hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor)—a native of Bury—spoke with great feeling about Bury, and he is clearly committed to his constituency. He paid an appropriate tribute to his predecessor, Alistair Burt, who worked extremely hard in government. He was, if I may say so, an unassuming but hard-working character who was popular in this House. He also was a son of Bury, and was very popular in the constituency.

That was the beginning of the sporting allusions, as we heard a great deal about Bury. We then heard from the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), who said that we would be more familiar with her constituency as the home of Old Trafford. She, too, spoke very well, paying an appropriate tribute to Winston Churchill.

The hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) paid an appropriate tribute to Robert Hughes, a lively Member of Parliament who made a contribution in many different ways and was, as I know as a near neighbour of his, a most assiduous constituency Member.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman) spoke about the housing problems in his constituency. I have some knowledge of those problems, having seen a presentation from the local authority. There are particular problems there, and some poverty, notwithstanding its proximity to central London. The hon. Gentleman spoke knowledgeably, and I appreciated his comments about Matthew Carrington, who was also well respected by his constituents and by the House.

I appreciated the speech by the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley). His predecessor, John Biffen, would greatly have appreciated the way in which he began his speech, and I wish him well in representing his constituents. He certainly follows a most distinguished predecessor who was a strong House of Commons man. We also heard from the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), who made a good speech and paid an appropriate tribute to Roger Knapman, who was also popular in the House and a good constituency Member.

We then moved from football to rugby league, which I enjoy. I appreciated the maiden speeches by the hon. Member for St. Helens, North (Mr. Watts), who spoke well about the problems that concern his constituents, and by the hon. Members for Liverpool, Garston (Ms Eagle) and for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson). The latter paid an appropriate tribute to Patrick Thompson, who was a most hard-working Member of Parliament and an assiduous constituency Member.

The last Labour Member from whom we heard was the hon. Member for Pudsey (Mr. Truswell), who spoke most appropriately about his constituency. As one who follows Yorkshire cricket, I think that he did justice to the distinguished cricketing antecedents of Pudsey. He paid a generous tribute to Sir Giles Shaw that was accurate in every respect. Sir Giles was a popular and distinguished Member of Parliament and an assiduous constituency Member. The hon. Gentleman made an excellent maiden speech.

The hon. Member for Taunton (Mrs. Ballard) made a good and knowledgeable speech from the Liberal Benches. I appreciate the tribute that she paid to David Nicholson, who took a lively interest in housing matters and would have wanted to take part in this debate had he been here.

The last maiden speech that we heard was from my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond). It was an excellent speech, and he spoke forcefully about his constituency and his constituents' interests. I, like him, represent a constituency on the borders of London, in the home counties, with all the tensions that exist there in trying to strike the right balances in planning and transport to get a good quality of life. He showed a real feeling for his constituents' problems and made a telling contribution to the debate on the Bill.

We heard good non-maiden speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Mid–Norfolk (Mr. Simpson), for Stone (Mr. Cash), for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) and for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn). A common strand running through those speeches was the large number of questions that the Bill leaves unanswered.

The Bill is in many ways shrouded in mystery. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Worcestershire put it appropriately when he said that it was a smokescreen. That reminded me of a description applied by my right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Chancellor to the statement on a comprehensive spending review given to the House by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury last week. My right hon. and learned Friend rightly described that announcement as

"a whole lot of smoke and mirrors".—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 1145.]

[Mr. James Clappison]

If that was smoke and mirrors, this was a bonfire in the hall of mirrors. If the Bill achieves anything, it is to make the comprehensive spending review look like a model of transparency and clarity.

When we consider the history of the pledge that lies behind the Bill, we see why there is a need for so much smoke and camouflage. The Labour party has long created the impression that the capital receipts were standing idle, were not being properly used and were waiting to be unlocked—a sort of pot of gold, an economic free good as my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) said in opening for the Opposition, or a sock under the bed.

It was a common misconception on the part of the Labour party in opposition that the capital receipts were being put to no good use. Certainly, the former spokesman on environment matters—now the Secretary of State for Health—propagated that view. He brought his economic wisdom and powers of analysis to bear on this problem in much the same way that he is bringing them to bear on the health service, with similar consequences. It was certainly the view of the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), who will reply to the debate. He thought that the capital receipts were wasted, were idle and not being used properly and served no good purpose. He imparted that view to Committees.

As the Under-Secretary of State will probably have discovered now that he has entered government, the truth is that the capital receipts have been put to perfectly prudent and proper use. They have been used to service debt and to keep council tax bills and rents down. The hon. Gentleman will now appreciate that. He has had to confess—this is the most interesting feature of the Bill—that there is a direct link between the capital receipts and public expenditure. Every pound of capital receipts released is an extra pound of public spending. The hon. Gentleman has now faced up to that, but he was not prepared to acknowledge it in the past. He did not acknowledge it when he spoke about the capital receipts being wasted.

We need more details about the Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire made a telling point. As he said, it is a shame that we could not have had the consultative paper before this debate. It is a shame, too, that the debate could not have been more co-ordinated with the Budget statement because we need to know how the measure will be paid for.

I asked the Under-Secretary of State to tell us in his reply whether the public expenditure implication will be met from within the budget of the Department of the Environment. Will it be met through a cut in other departmental programmes or will it be transferred to the Treasury? Are we going to have to be told by the Chancellor of the Exchequer that the public sector borrowing requirement will be increased, that there will have to be cuts in some other Departments' programmes, or that there will be an increase in taxation?

What has clearly emerged from this debate is that the Bill is part of a black hole in the Labour party's plans—a black hole between its plans and how they will be paid for. The Under-Secretary of State will have to say a little more about that in his reply. He will also have to tell us a little more about how the spending of the capital receipts will be phased than the Minister of State did in her opening speech. The hon. Lady said that it would be phased over a prudent period. Can we be told how long that will be? What is a period that is consistent with prudent financial management? Can the Under-Secretary of State tell us when the first tranche will be released? Will it be this year? When will the release take place and how much will it consist of? The hon. Lady is saying that she does not know, but we need to know the answers to those questions if we are to form a judgment on the Bill.

Perhaps the Under-Secretary of State can also tell us how the capital receipts will be released and about the implications for capital receipt rich authorities. We heard from the hon. Lady that there might be an implication for them in the form of what she described as a distribution based one third on possession of capital receipts and two thirds on need. We need to know a little more about that. I am sure that those hon. Members, including Labour Members, who spoke about authorities with capital receipts, such as Vale Royal and Flintshire, will seek reassurance from the Government that their authorities will not be penalised by the mechanism for distributing capital receipts.

What will happen to future capital receipts? We would also like to know more about clause 2, which is bald and bold. As my hon. Friends the Members for South Cambridgeshire and for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) said, it appears to give local authorities a licence to spend and borrow, and to be at variance with prudent financial management. We need more answers on that.

Unless all our questions are properly answered, we will begin to suspect that the Bill, which merely takes into account capital receipts in the allocation of supplementary credits, embodies a bogus policy. The more we hear about it, the more bogus it seems, particularly when we discover that it does not involve the release of an economic free good but more public spending, which will have to be paid for in other ways.

If Labour Members want to know the difference between a bogus policy and one that brings real benefit to people, carried through by a truly radical Government, they could do no better than to consider how the capital receipts arose in the first place. It was largely due to council tenants exercising the right to buy and becoming home owners. Since 1979, in England and Wales alone 1.3 council tenants became home owners. As Conservative Members reminded the Government, Labour local authorities hardly danced with glee about it. That is part of the general extension of home owning since 1979. Those 1.3 million people are part of the 4 million householders who have become home owners since 1979. There has been a significant increase in the proportion of the population owning their own homes, up from 56 to 68 per cent. Those are all things from which we take great credit.

Labour Members would do well to consider the radical ways by which we succeeded in making public money go further through levering in private finance. In her opening speech, the Minister of State tiptoed towards acknowledging the success of many of our initiatives, particularly in talking about partnerships and transfer as the best route for getting private finance into the public sector. She would do well to acknowledge frankly our success with the large-scale voluntary transfer programme

and the £3.8 billion of private finance levered in for 53 local authorities. That is bringing benefit to tens of thousands of tenants up and down the country, including tenants in the very poorest estates, who benefit from the estates renewal challenge fund, the latest round of which in February saw £140 million of public money lever in some £300 million of private finance. Those are real policies, bringing real benefits to people, in many cases people in the greatest need.

Such policies have shown how public money can be used to lever in additional private money and give the best possible value. While the Minister tiptoed towards acknowledging their success, in some speeches from Labour Members there seemed to be a residual antipathy to private sector involvement through large-scale voluntary transfer and to bringing in private money.

We need straight answers to our questions. It may not be the Under-Secretary who can deal with this, but we need an explanation of the financial background to the Bill and its public expenditure implications. We need to know where the black hole is going to be filled in, and a frank acknowledgment that this is not a free good and that capital receipts were not simply being stored away for no purpose. We need a frank acknowledgement that the sums that the Government have presented to the electorate do not add up.

We know that the Labour party, from the Prime Minister downwards, has some difficulty in doing its sums. Those sums seem to have gone spectacularly awry on this occasion: we see an enormous black hole between what the party promised in opposition and what it is now having to do in government. It is leaving us with huge public spending implications. It is time that we had some straight answers to the straight questions that we have asked, and to other straight questions about exactly how the Bill will operate and what further legislation will be needed to make Labour's policy work.

9.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I thank the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) for kindly welcoming me to my post. I reciprocate by welcoming him to his, and assuring him—as we have a certain reciprocal interest—that the office that he used to occupy, and the staff who used to assist him, are in good hands and proving extremely helpful to the new Government.

We have had an interesting debate about a subject of the utmost importance: the state of the nation's housing and the urgent need to increase investment to tackle the acute problems of homelessness and poor housing conditions from which all too many of our fellow citizens suffer.

In recent weeks, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer—who we gather is still, albeit marginally, the front runner for the leadership of the Opposition—has claimed that the outgoing Government left a wonderful inheritance. In his closing remarks, the hon. Member for Hertsmere repeated that claim in relation to housing. I shall remind the House of the legacy that was left by the last Government. Nearly 120,000 households were accepted as homeless by local authorities in England last year—more than twice the number when Labour was last in power. We have seen the degrading spectacle of homeless youngsters sleeping and begging on the streets of our cities, some just a stone's throw from the House. About 1.5 million homes are unfit for human habitation and there is a massive backlog of housing in poor condition that desperately needs modernisation and improvement.

The private housing market is only just recovering from the worst recession to hit it since the war—a recession which also brought repossessions on a scale that has never before been experienced in the country's history. Investment in social housing has been savagely cut in successive years; those cuts have reduced the Housing Corporation's approved development programme by two thirds in the past five years and nearly halved the local authority housing investment programme over the same period. Consequently, the output of new housing for social needs has been reduced to the lowest levels recorded in this country under any Government since the war.

What an appalling record. What a shameful failure. So much for Tory claims of a wonderful legacy.

The truth is that the new Government had to act swiftly and boldly to reverse the disastrous consequences of 18 years of Tory neglect. That is what we have done by presenting the Bill, which honours our clear manifesto commitment to reverse the legacy of neglect and underinvestment in housing by

"re-investing capital receipts from the sale of council houses in building new houses and rehabilitating old ones."

Tonight, we begin the process of repairing the damage. Tonight, we begin the process of restoring hope to communities that have been neglected and abandoned. Tonight, we begin the process of restoring public responsibility for our country's housing needs.

Mr. Curry *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: I shall give way to the right hon. Gentleman, although I note that he has been rather absent from our debate this evening.

Mr. Curry: The hon. Gentleman used the phrase "reinvesting capital receipts". Will he explain how the Bill reinvests capital receipts? It does not touch capital receipts; all it does is enable the Secretary of State to take them into account in issuing supplementary credit approvals.

Mr. Raynsford: I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman has had other matters on his mind for the past few hours. He may therefore have forgotten the clear explanation given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State at the outset of the debate, in which she made it clear that the Bill creates the framework whereby, through supplementary credit approvals, the Secretary of State will be able to reinvest sums related to the capital receipts that had been set aside as a result of the previous Government's decision. We are doing that to achieve investment, to get homes built for the homeless and to move people who are currently in bad housing into decent accommodation.

Tonight, the House has had a good opportunity to debate the implications of the Bill. It has been a wide-ranging debate, remarkable for the number of confident, eloquent speeches from new Members. We

[Mr. Raynsford]

have heard no fewer than 16 maiden speeches, which I suspect might be a record, although others with greater experience may be able to advise me on that. Anyone who is apprehensive about the future of healthy democracy in this country needs only listen to those speeches to know that we have some extremely talented and accomplished new Members in the House. We can look forward to hearing some fine speeches in the years ahead.

Mr. Curry: Most of them will not get another chance until 1999.

Mr. Raynsford: The right hon. Gentleman has had divided loyalties tonight—the debate and events elsewhere. I must tell him that his performance was a little disappointing, but perhaps that was because he was distracted. He started his speech with a rather strange image of my hon. Friend the Minister of State, whom he described as Salome. I am the first to express admiration for my hon. Friend and her great skills, but I do not believe that the image of Salome is appropriate.

If the right hon. Gentleman had thought about it as he unravelled that image, he would know that Salome's only real claim to fame in history and literature is that her opponent managed to lose his head. I hope that no such fate befalls the right hon. Gentleman. [HON. MEMBERS: "On Thursday."] I have no idea whether the candidate for the leadership of his party whom he is not supporting has other intentions for him. I shall leave that to the private grief of the Conservative party.

The right hon. Gentleman appeared a little surprised by my hon. Friend's explanation of our plans. He showed that at one or two points in his speech, when he almost suggested that the Bill was a sensible measure which he could support. He acknowledged the case for mobilising receipts; much of his speech concentrated on detailed matters. At the last moment, however, he displayed the knee-jerk reaction and he could not bring himself to say, "This is a sensible measure. We will ask a few questions to get the detail right, but we will support it." He gave that knee-jerk reaction because Tory central office had already issued the brief, so we had to hear from him that the Opposition would vote against the Bill.

I detect a little ambivalence in the right hon. Gentleman's attitude and we will look to tease that out in the weeks ahead. In any case, I hope that he will be with us next week and is not relegated to the Back Benches.

My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall) made a powerful speech in which he highlighted the damage caused by the cuts in housing investment in the past 18 years. He spoke in particular about the problems confronting Halton borough council and Vale Royal district council. I have happy memories of visiting those authorities just over a year ago. My hon. Friend rightly focused on the huge benefits that will result from the Bill to assist those authorities and many others to improve their housing provision.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) made a maiden speech that contained a fascinating historical fact. He told us that this week marks the 782nd anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta. One always learns something in the House. He also said that although his constituency is probably one of the most prosperous in the country, it has problems. He spoke particularly of pollution and traffic problems, but I am sure that he recognises that there are also housing problems in that district. However, he seemed to rely more heavily on the briefing he had received from Conservative central office than on a full understanding of the Bill when making some of his observations, not least his claim that the Bill would lead to significant increases in council taxes and rents. I have to tell him that, contrary to that claim, the capital receipts initiative will not lead to an increase in council tax or rents. There is no reason why either rents or council tax levels should rise as a result of the initiative. We shall be issuing supplementary credit approvals which will receive revenue support in the usual way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey), in a confident and impressive maiden speech, outlined the overwhelming evidence of housing need in Bristol and highlighted the problems of homelessness and bad housing. She described a community that was divided, despite the symbolism of the Clifton suspension bridge, by which most of us know her constituency. She spoke of a community with great wealth on one side and great poverty on the other.

Repeatedly, throughout the debate, we heard the theme of a divided, fractured society in which a substantial number of people do not share in the advantages enjoyed by the well-to-do. It is our intention as a Government to break down those divisions, to repair those fractures and to create a more equal and united society.

Mr. Cash: Will the hon. Gentleman explain how the proposals in the Bill will, as he claims, make more money available to the people who want it in the constituencies represented by Labour Members?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman clearly did not listen to the explanation given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State in her opening remarks. She made it clear that we would, through supplementary credit approvals, issue additional opportunities to authorities and that the supplementary credit approvals would be calculated two thirds by relation to need to spend, which would ensure that areas in need would be able to get the additional investment necessary to improve their housing or to build new housing.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders), whom I congratulate on his extremely narrow victory in the general election, is the Liberal Democrats' spokesman on housing matters, but he seemed a little unsure about the specific proposals. In particular, he seemed doubtful as to whether allocations to local authorities should be based on need, so I repeat my response to the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash). Under the capital receipts initiative, we propose to distribute resources to a formula of one third on the basis of where they were generated and two thirds on the basis of need. The generalised needs index will be used as a measure of need. Equally, we have changed the formula for the allocation of housing investment finance to ensure that 50 per cent. of the allocation will now be made on the basis of need, which was not the case previously. The hon. Member for Torbay will recognise from that our commitment to tackle housing need.

My hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) spoke, in a moving speech, of the needs of his constituents, especially those in bad housing in

Flintshire and of the problems of the unemployed. He clearly recognised the valuable contribution that the Bill will make, both to meet housing needs and to tackle the problems of unemployment.

The hon. Member for Mid–Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) acknowledged the extent of unmet housing need, but offered no suggestion on how that need might best be met. His opposition to the Bill seemed to smack of party loyalty rather than reflect the more rigorous analysis that I am sure he gives to subjects with which he is better acquainted, such as the country's defence needs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), in an accomplished, witty and engaging maiden speech, shared his enthusiasm for the gastronomic delights of Bury and for the recent success of its football team. He also revealed an interest in history by demonstrating his knowledge, not only of Sir Robert Peel, but of the 1903 cup final success of his football team.

The hon. Member for Taunton (Mrs. Ballard), in an effective maiden speech, conjured up an image of the rebellious tradition in Somerset and the west country, which might have made her party's leader anxious. I hope that she has no problems on that score. She strongly endorsed the role of local authorities in housing. After 18 years when local authorities have been denigrated and run down by the Conservatives, I can assure her that the Government will support them and see them having a strong and positive role in this area.

The hon. Lady also talked about people sleeping rough in her constituency. My hon. Friend the Minister of State has already announced that we shall consider offering funding to support local authorities that are tackling rough sleeping in their areas. I am sure that the hon. Lady will want to pursue that possibility.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), in a thoughtful and committed speech, revealed her understanding of her constituents' needs and highlighted the importance of investment, not just for housing but for regeneration. She recognised the contribution that the Bill will have to make in that respect.

The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) argued the case for more discretion for local authorities. I am not sure that his Front Bench was terribly comfortable with that argument. It was not long before the hon. Gentleman got on to Maastricht; I suspect that the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) would have been even more unhappy, had he been here, listening to his hon. Friend discussing Maastricht in this context.

The hon. Member for Stone also advocated additional investment for tackling the needs of the homeless and youth unemployment. The Government welcome any sinner who repents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), in another impressive maiden speech, highlighted the problems of divided communities in a constituency with great wealth and great poverty. Among other things, he spoke about the need for proper housing for those with special needs who are some of the most vulnerable people in society. I endorse the concerns that he voiced about the need for an adequate supply of special needs housing.

The hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) saw this as a melancholy occasion. From his perspective, I imagine it was—listening to a litany of defeated Conservative candidates being referred to in maiden speeches. He revealed the ambivalence among Tory Members on housing issues for, unlike some of his colleagues, who had argued against additional expenditure, he argued that the Bill would not generate enough money to tackle the problems. The hon. Gentleman must make up his mind: is he in favour of tackling the problems more effectively, in which case there is a need for the increased investment that the Bill will achieve, or is he lining up with the diehards in his party who oppose any increased investment to meet housing need? It is a classic illustration of how the Opposition are split on this subject.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman), in yet another impressive maiden speech, referred to football clubs. He has the benefit of not one, but two, successful clubs in his constituency. He paid generous tributes to his predecessors—but I had better keep quiet on that score since he mentioned me among them. I briefly had the good fortune to represent part of the constituency for which he now sits.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) expressed criticism of the Government's failure, in his view, to publish guidance before publishing the Bill, which he believes should have been brought in after the Budget. I must tell him that we are acting now because it is right and proper to put these measures in place as soon as possible so as to achieve increased investment to tackle the needs that the Bill is designed to meet. There is no benefit in delay. We shall publish guidance shortly in the form of consultation with local authorities, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will make clear all the financial implications and the arrangements for the supplementary credit approvals in his Budget speech—so the hon. Gentleman will not have long to wait. We are acting quickly so that people who have waited far too long for the prospect of a decent home are left waiting no longer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) acknowledged the problem of representing Westminster on the Labour Benches. I understand her ambivalence, given the antics of the majority party on the council in her area. She highlighted the problems of leaseholders—especially the many who are encountering real difficulties achieving the benefit of leasehold reform—and the problems of private tenants confronted with huge rent increases.

My hon. Friend rightly focused on the link between housing and ill-health. She is absolutely right that the issues of housing and health cannot be separated. The initiative that we are announcing tonight will help to ensure that some people get the benefit of better housing, which will improve their health prospects.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) referred to the repairs backlog and regeneration projects involving the need for more than bricks and mortar. We are concerned, as he is, about the importance of maximising the regeneration benefit of this initiative and, as my hon. Friend the Minister of State said, there will be encouragement for associated regeneration initiatives, connected with the housing activity that is the main thrust of this initiative.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke about the needs of people with disabilities and mentioned part M of the Building Regulations. We are studying that issue with

[Mr. Raynsford]

some urgency, because it is important and we need to reach decisions soon as to the right way to proceed in the interests of people with disabilities. I can assure him that the Government are taking that issue very seriously.

Mr. Burstow *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, this has been a long debate in which many speeches I need to mention have been made, and time is short.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), in another impressive maiden speech, highlighted the regeneration potential in her constituency and in Yorkshire and Humberside. She is a powerful advocate for Doncaster, and in response to her request for my hon. Friend the Minister of State or me to visit Doncaster, I can assure her that we shall certainly want to do so as soon as a suitable opportunity arises.

The hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) repeated the anxieties expressed by other Conservative Members about what she felt was undue haste in introducing legislation. I have already responded to that. We are doing this because there is a clear need to meet the needs of people who are badly housed and homeless. We need to move swiftly; we will not delay.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Ms McDonagh) spoke eloquently about housing need in her area and did so as someone with great experience, having worked in housing and chaired her borough's housing committee. She made an important and valuable contribution to the debate and will, I know, continue to do so in the House in the years ahead.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley) also declared a Westminster connection, although that was not the main focus of his speech as he has found a constituency far from the borough in which the House is located. In a wide-ranging speech, he mentioned rural problems, BSE and opencast mining. I can assure him that my hon. Friend the Minister of State responsible for planning policy and I are both working hard on the opencast mining issue and the minerals planning guidance. We are looking closely at PPG3 in relation to the need for social housing as part of new housing developments.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) made three criticisms of our policy. He is wrong on two counts and I simply differ from him on the third. First, he said that resources would not create sustainable employment but would cause the country to revert to boom-bust. That is pretty rich from a representative of the party that is synonymous with boom-bust. I also say to him that our phasing arrangements are designed to ensure that growth is gradual and progressive, that there is no unacceptable boom and that the increased investment is sustainable. That is an integral part of our policy.

The hon. Gentleman's second point was that there would be substitution: that local authorities would spend the money elsewhere or would spend the receipts then use other money elsewhere. They will be unable to do so, because the receipts will be targeted and we shall ensure that local authorities come up with schemes that meet the specific objectives that the Government are setting. That is why we are consulting and giving local authorities clear guidelines. We shall maintain a close watch on how those sums are spent. We want them used to the best effect to ensure that there is investment in areas where it is needed.

Mr. Letwin *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I shall come to his third point. He said that there would be extra spending. We recognise that fact. The extra spending is necessary to repair the damage left by the Conservative Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) discussed poverty and deprivation in his constituency, which is in the midst of some of the country's loveliest countryside. He pleaded for protection of the countryside and for social housing. I entirely endorse those concerns.

My hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, North (Mr. Watts) paid an important tribute to his predecessor, now Lord Evans, who is well known and greatly valued by Labour Members. He also paid tribute to his constituency and made a strong plea for its housing needs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Ms Eagle), made another highly accomplished maiden speech. There was a moment of ambivalence when I was unsure whether I was listening to her or her sister. The quality of her voice and how she presented her case were reminiscent of the qualities that have made her sister, the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, such an effective and respected Member.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) spoke with great feeling and knowledge about his area's housing needs. He discussed the backlog of older housing in need of modernisation, which I have seen in the course of several visits to his constituency. Those problems will be tackled by the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) told us a tale of two councils—the contrast in the performance of the London boroughs of Merton and of Wandsworth in looking after their areas' housing needs. He highlighted the distressing case of individuals who have suffered as a result of Wandsworth council's gross maladministration and incompetence.

The hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) gave us an interesting vignette of the old-style Tory prejudice against council housing and councils. I fear that he is ideologically blinkered and that it will probably be some time before the realities of life begin to sink in. I hope that they will one day, for his own sake.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Mr. Truswell), in the last of the maiden speeches, spoke humorously about the glories of his constituency—prams, fish and chips, and cricket. He paid a generous tribute to his predecessor and highlighted the importance not just of housing but the welfare-to-work initiatives.

Summing up for the Opposition, the hon. Member for Hertsmere raised three main issues. He described our initiative as a bonfire in a hall of mirrors, which was an entirely inappropriate image. The only bonfire that relates to this subject is the bonfire of the vanities, which consumed his party in the last general election. Its vanity was to assume that it had a right to govern. The British electorate gave it its come-uppance on 1 May. The hon. Gentleman then claimed that he had discovered a change of stance on the part of the Government over public

expenditure. I have always made it clear that releasing capital receipts would increase public expenditure but that it was right to use that money to invest in houses and get people back to work. We differ from the Opposition in that we believe that resources should be put to good effect whereas they simply want to avoid meeting their responsibilities.

I stress again that we shall shortly consult local authorities on the mechanisms for releasing capital receipts. We propose to do so on the basis of two thirds in relation to need and one third in relation to the location of receipts.

The Government's capital receipts initiative has received an overwhelming endorsement from the public and from the wide range of people and organisations who know about the country's housing needs and understand the wide economic benefits that will flow from increased investment in housing and regeneration.

The Chartered Institute of Housing has stated that it is very pleased that the Government have presented the Bill so quickly. The Local Government Association has said that the rapid move to introduce legislation on capital receipts is very welcome. The National Housing Federation has consistently called for the release of resources to tackle disrepair and the need for new housing. The House-Builders Federation has hailed the policy as a welcome first step. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has commented that the measure could create 13,000 new jobs a year for the construction industry in each of the next five years.

The only people who have failed to respond positively are Conservative Members. They are caught in a time warp. They are clinging on to the memory of their own time in office. They are incapable of recognising that that world ended on 1 May. Like the Bourbons, they seem incapable of learning anything and incapable of forgetting anything.

The Conservatives are the party which allowed homelessness to double and allowed repossessions on a scale never before seen in this country. They slashed investment in housing while forcing up rents and leaving tenants trapped in benefit. Their record speaks for itself. The people of Britain have delivered their verdict. They have elected a new Government with a mandate for change.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 409, Noes 151.

Division No. 30] **[10 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Anger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard *(Shef'ld Hallam)*
Allen, Graham *(Nottingham N)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne *(Aberd'n S)*
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Robert
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan (Tynemouth)
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain *(Hammersmith & Fulham)*
Colman, Anthony *(Putney)*
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Curtis–Thomas, Ms Clare
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Ms Janet
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Ms Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael John *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Ms Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian (Leeds NE)
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John

Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Ms Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Ms Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Miss Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Tessa
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Ms Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Ms Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Ms Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Opik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Ms Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Ms Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Dr Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. Clive Betts.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher

Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(N Essex)*
Johnson Smith,
Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merchant, Piers
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple–Morris, Peter
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Bowen Wells and
Mr. Richard Ottaway.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTARY CREDIT APPROVALS) BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other Act.—*[Mr. Graham Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

Auditors (Regulation)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Graham Allen.]*

10.17 pm

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on his appointment and on being able to share with me the fun and excitement of this evening's Adjournment debate. Audit is not often regarded as a fun subject: indeed, auditors are supposed to be accountants who cannot stand the excitement of working in the profession.

The debate arises because the Government are about to publish a Bill to allow accountancy partnerships to set up limited liability partnerships. That would ensure that all the partners in a practice, who are currently liable down to their last Jaguar and their last yacht, could evade those liabilities. It seems curious that such a limitation of liabilities should be proposed by a Labour Government because it is a major concession to a huge vested interest: the big accountancy firms.

Such firms have a statutory monopoly of audit, which is given to protect the stakeholders. Stakeholders are identified by the various Companies Acts over the years as shareholders, creditors, employees—even journalists, as well as the public and markets. It is the job of auditors to provide information to all those stakeholders, invigilate the performance of firms and audit the accounts on their behalf. They are failing in that responsibility.

Such failure has been clearly demonstrated by a number of scandals—Bank of Credit and Commerce International, Maxwell, Levitt, Polly Peck, MTM, Queens Moat Houses, British and Commonwealth, Barings and Resort Hotels. There is an enormous list of failures and scandals, about which in each case the cry has gone up, "Where were the auditors?" Now we know. They were busy lobbying the Department of Trade and Industry for protection from liability for the consequences of their own failure.

If auditors want to avoid such liability, they can turn themselves into limited liability companies. When I was serving on the Standing Committee of the Companies Bill in 1989, I remember auditors lobbying for such a prerogative. They said that it was extremely important that they should be allowed to turn themselves into limited liability companies. We agreed to it at the behest of the then Government. Having agreed to it, the auditors now do not want to become limited liability companies because they want to remain partnerships.

There are various tax perks and advantages of being a partnership. There is also the great advantage of secrecy—auditors do not have to publish anything about their affairs, performance or activities. They want to keep the tax perks and secrecy, but they want protection from the liability that is supposed to be conceded by a partnership, making the partners liable for everything in each case.

Such limitation of liability seems a curious principle for a Labour Government to enact. It is anti-consumer to do so. After the Caparo judgment, the consumer has all too little redress or rights against auditors. If we concede limitation of liability, such redress will be even more limited.

The principle is curious, too, in the light of the very dubious and dodgy tactics used by big accountancy houses to try to get such limitation of liability.

[Mr. Austin Mitchell]

They lobbied first through Ian Greer Associates and attempted to persuade the then Minister of Corporate Affairs, Neil Hamilton, to concede the principle. He ran up against a small obstacle when the Law Commission ruled that the proportion of liability that they were then asking for was against the public interest, so that avenue was blocked off.

Price Waterhouse then decided to transfer its lobbying activity to Jersey, work on the tin-pot legislature there in order to get the prerogative and then come back and blackmail the British Government into conceding the principle so as to stop competition from Jersey. In effect, it bought legislation in Jersey, and fast-track legislation, too: it was rushed through with very little debate. The legislation cost £1 million to draw up, and through a series of murky deals of the kind that go on in Jersey, it achieved its goal.

Price Waterhouse did not want to use the privilege that it had been given to set up in Jersey because who in their right mind in this country would use dodgy auditors set up in a tin-pot jurisdiction in Jersey to audit the accounts of a major public limited company? It wanted to blackmail the British Government into conceding what it had already bought in Jersey. It is an interesting legislative procedure to go overseas, buy legislation, then come back and say to the British Government, "Do the same for us." The tactic seems to have worked under the previous Government, since here we are, as a Labour Government, bringing in legislation that was obviously prepared under that previous Government.

Such limitation of liability is curious because if we are to have fair trading the privilege must be extended to all partnerships of all kinds and to all firms that compete with big accountancy houses but do not audit, such as management selection and tax advice and consultancy services. It would be anti-competitive to make such a concession to just one section—the auditors—and not to all partnerships and all firms that compete with partnerships.

The real problem with the proposal is whether it is responsible government to confer such an enormous privilege on the auditors without the quid pro quo of a drastic change in the regulatory framework for auditing, which at present is totally inadequate. The regulation of auditing has always been kept privileged by the big accountancy houses and the professional bodies. The present structures are inefficient, ineffective and pathetic.

We have a structure of so-called self-regulation which essentially means that the mafia regulate the mafia. In other words, a trade association regulates itself. It would be unacceptable if a trade union asked to regulate industrial relations, but, because the regulator is a professional body, responsibility is conceded.

There is a proliferation of overlapping bodies. Regulation is mostly done by professional bodies as recognised supervisory bodies. The professional bodies are themselves dominated by the big accountancy houses, which give their partners and staff time off to run the professional institutes, whose powers are pathetic. For example, one of the biggest fines imposed by the regulatory structure was on Messrs. Jordan and Stone of Coopers and Lybrand for their infringement of the guidelines in accepting work on the liquidation of Polly Peck when their firm was already involved. They were fined £1,000 each. What a massive, terrifying fine that was: the fees from the insolvency were £17 million, so the firm must have been terrified at such horrendous fines from the regulatory bodies. Only one partner has been disqualified by the regulatory procedure—and he retired to Switzerland. If that is regulation, I do not know what real discipline would be like.

The structure includes no compensation for defrauded consumers, and no investigation of audit practices is undertaken. Several major audit firms have been criticised by Department of Trade and Industry inspectors and inquiries. The buck is passed back to the professional bodies, which do nothing. However often one writes to them, nothing happens. They have not investigated the standards of any of the big accountancy houses. The Securities and Exchange Commission in the United States is planning to investigate Coopers and Lybrand, which has been involved in a series of headline scandals there, but we cannot hope for such an investigation here. What chance is there that one of the big firms will have its standards investigated by such a light-touch regulatory regime?

The regulatory bodies never report on audit failure. There were failures of the audit in Maxwell, Levitt, Polly Peck, Wallace Smith, Homes Assured and London United Investment. None of them was investigated. In the United States, the Kerry committee investigated the audit of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International. Price Waterhouse, which is an international body, said that it could not co-operate with an investigation in the US because it was a firm of British auditors. The fact that it sells its services internationally was apparently not relevant: because it is a British firm, it can refuse to give any evidence to the Kerry inquiry. It is no wonder that the Kerry Brown report states—for the Minister's information, it is in chapter 10—that the partnership structure inhibits international regulation. If someone has a case against Union Carbide, the case can be pursued in the American courts, but if someone has a case against Price Waterhouse UK, it cannot be pursued in the American courts. The same problem arose with KPMG and the Ferranti affair.

The Financial Reporting Panel has been set up and on 23 occasions it has found that published audited accounts were defective. The auditors had drawn a fee, established that the accounts were true and fair and given their approval; yet the Financial Reporting panel said that they were defective. There has never been an investigation of any of those 23 audit firms, and action has been taken against none of them. This is not regulation—it is a farce.

It is disastrous, as audit is dominated by the big firms which do 90 per cent. of audits for plcs and are in intense competition with each other as the sellers of services. They want to sell other services which are more profitable than audit. To do that, they want to get a foot in the door by cutting the price of the audit. They get the contract with the firm, and then use that as a market stall to sell other services. A classic example four years back was when Price Waterhouse—or half-Price Waterhouse, as it should be called—offered to cut the audit fee for the Prudential by £900,000 to get that work so that they could sell other services.

Such competition must debase the audit. It imposes pressure, as unqualified people are used, corners are cut and time is reduced. It produces a potential for disaster,

but firms are getting away with it because of the lack of regulation and effective inquiry, and because auditing standards are effectively under the control of the audit industry, whereas the licensing, monitoring, complaints, investigations and appeals are under the control of the accountancy bodies, which are, in turn, dominated by the big firms. It is a lovely little racket.

Trade associations cannot be regulators, and the only people excluded from all this are the consumers of accounts, the stakeholders, the public and anyone who loses money in the scandals produced by this situation. The last Government believed in self-regulation. The present Government believe in independent regulation—the principle that we are establishing in financial services and which we promised in the 1992 manifesto for accountancy and audit. We need independent regulation which will ban the sale of other services to audit clients, enforce the rotation of auditors, require auditors to report and detect fraud as they do in local government—they just do not want to take it on in the big firms—and acknowledge the public interest.

Any limitation of liability makes it essential that the Government as a quid pro quo impose independent regulation, because liability cannot be limited in the present regulatory framework without disasters ensuing for the consumers of accounts and without the powers of vested interests being increased. Such vested interests must be made answerable. It is wrong to make concessions to the accountancy firms unless we strengthen the power of stakeholders against negligent auditors. That would be disastrous, and certainly would not coincide with the purpose of the Government, who want to encourage and sustain a stakeholder society. We want to protect the consumer, and we need a regime which investigates standards, punishes derelictions and failures and gives confidence to stakeholders.

This is a monopoly based on a statute given to firms for public purposes which they are not fulfilling adequately. Only effective independent regulation can impose those purposes. We cannot have a situation in which such a concession can be given to auditors without the public being given some protection from the consequences of the failures of those auditors, and without a framework of regulation which requires them to fulfil their responsibilities. Independent regulation is the essential quid pro quo in this case—or perhaps I should say quo pro quid pro quid pro quid, because that is what will arise if this limitation of liability is conceded without effective regulation.

10.33 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry (Mr. Ian McCartney): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) for an animated, enthusiastic and provocative presentation of his case. Over the years, he has led the debate about the regulation of auditors, and his contribution has always been made from the point of view of the public interest. In that respect, my views are the same as his: the availability of reliable, audited accounts is a fundamental matter of public interest, and the proper regulation of auditors is an important aspect of maintaining confidence in the environment for doing business in the United Kingdom.

My hon. Friend will also be aware that the Government are committed, through our business manifesto, to ensuring that there is a framework of independent regulation for the accountancy profession, of which statutory auditors are a part. He will appreciate that, in view of time constraints, I shall confine myself to the general criteria that must guide us in the matter. The criteria are effectiveness, independence and transparency.

My hon. Friend also referred to various proposals for changes to audit regulation and to the liability of auditors. Let me make it absolutely clear that we shall give a full and fair hearing to all proposals. We shall also give full consideration to the views expressed by all interested parties. As the Government, our fundamental responsibility is to come to a view on how to strike a fair overall balance, in the public interest. I assure my hon. Friend that we shall consider all proposals fully and rigorously from that standpoint.

An extensive framework for the regulation of auditing, derived ultimately from European Union legislation, was put in place by the Companies Act 1989. What particularly interests me is its effectiveness, and how we improve any aspects of the system that are in need of improvement. Under the Act, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is responsible for recognising appropriately qualified bodies to maintain standards of qualification and supervision within the profession. The bodies are required to submit annual reports to the Secretary of State on their reporting functions.

The qualifying and supervising bodies must ensure, for example, that auditors have undergone an appropriate period of theoretical study and of professional experience; that rules are in place to ensure that standards are maintained; and that auditors are fit and proper people, with the necessary standards of professional integrity. They also have systems of discipline, appeals systems and procedures for dealing with complaints.

In addition, the standards to which auditors work are set by a body, the Auditing Practices Board, half of whose members are practising auditors, the other half being business people, lawyers, academics and others with wide business experience—the stakeholders to whom my hon. Friend referred.

Whenever there is a company collapse, there is a rush to blame the auditors. Often, aggrieved parties will seek to sue the auditors for alleged negligence. I should like to consider two aspects of that: are there effective procedures for dealing with problems when something goes wrong; and is there an effective system of monitoring and feedback to raise general standards, so that problems are less likely to occur in the first place?

For major public interest cases, the joint disciplinary scheme operates as an independent investigator on behalf of the three main professional bodies and, after investigation, makes recommendations to them. The sponsoring bodies are currently reviewing the operation of the scheme and I shall, of course, take the closest interest in the proposals that they develop to improve its effectiveness.

I cannot comment on individual cases that are before the courts or under investigation, but I strongly agree with my hon. Friend's view that the system of investigation, for cases of major public interest and for all other cases, should be subject to continuing independent review.

That is an aspect which I shall certainly bear in mind when I receive the profession's own proposals for independent scrutiny of its regulatory activities. Underpinning that, there is, of course, the system of

[Mr. Ian McCartney]

monitoring of auditors set up by the 1989 Act, refined in the light of an extensive review in 1994, and overseen by the Secretary of State.

I want to talk about certain aspects of improving the system as a whole. My hon. Friend will be aware that the present system of annual reporting is transparent, in that the supervisory bodies' annual reports are published and laid before the House. As he will have seen, those reports provide a valuable pen picture of the way in which the bodies fulfil the requirements placed on them and highlight areas for improvement. The fifth set of reports has recently been submitted to the Department. I intend to scrutinise them and I am sure that my hon. Friend will do so, too. I look forward to hearing his views.

The audit monitoring process was the subject of extensive scrutiny by Peter Moizer, professor of accounting at Leeds university, at the request of my Department. His report was published in 1994. Professor Moizer considered in detail the monitoring arrangements put in place by the supervisory bodies. He concluded:

"I believe that the monitoring units are working well and effectively and that self-regulation is being operated conscientiously."

Those are the views of an independent academic on the functioning of the monitoring process.

The report also made a number of recommendations for improvements to the audit monitoring processes. Many of the recommendations, which included an increase in the frequency of visits, to ensure that all firms would be visited over a five-year period, and greater co-ordination among the monitoring bodies, have been implemented by the bodies.

A recommendation for greater public scrutiny of the audit monitoring process is picked up by the professional bodies' current work on proposals for the creation of an independent oversight body. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) has written to my Department on that matter. I can assure him that I shall meet him and his colleagues at a later date to discuss the issues that he has put before me and my officials.

The annual reports to the Secretary of State include material on action taken against auditors who are found wanting and on the handling of complaints. I cannot pre-empt the contents of the reports for 1996, which have not yet been published, but I remind my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby that in 1995, a total of 63 member firms of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales had their registration withdrawn or surrendered, which is slightly more than the number to which my hon. Friend seemed to allude.

Mr. Mitchell: I was talking about the auditing of the major plcs. All the sanctions and disciplinary procedures are exercised energetically against smaller firms. The weight of regulation falls on them. The real problem, however, is the debasement of audit by the big firms, which are largely unaccountable and which dominate the regulation process.

Mr. McCartney: My hon. Friend has reiterated some of the issues that he has written to me about. I think that I have said that I am prepared to consider them as part of the consultation process. I shall give the evidence that he has placed before me adequate consideration, as part of the consultation process that I shall have with him and with the individuals who advise him on the issue.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): When considering those matters, will the Minister take account of the experience in north America and in particular the regulatory structure in the United States, and perhaps apply some of the lessons that his hon. Friend drew to his attention, so that those structures can be applied in the United Kingdom?

Mr. McCartney: At the outset, I said that I was open to consideration of a range of issues, including the contribution that my hon. Friend has made this evening and in writing on numerous occasions. I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Front Bench, by the way. I am not sure whether this is a Liberal Democrat takeover of the Opposition Front Bench, but he is a welcome sight after some of the individuals whom I occasionally have to face across the Dispatch Box. I wish him well and hope to see him on many more occasions.

As I said, in 1995, a total of 63 member firms of the English institute had their registration withdrawn. Restrictions were also placed on the registration of a further 107 firms—that is out of a total of 1,115 matters that were pursued by the institute following monitoring visits.

The firms, the professional bodies and the Auditing Practices Board are increasingly looking to ensure that lessons from past failures are brought to practitioners' attention.

Obviously, it is easy to criticise any system of delegated regulation and to say that those closely involved are not best placed to form an independent view of the effectiveness of the system. The answer to such doubts is to ensure the transparency of the system, so that its independence can be seen by all.

That brings me back to the Government's commitment to ensuring that there is a framework of independent regulation. That is the standpoint from which I shall be considering the proposals for the independent external review of their regulatory activities that the professional bodies are now preparing. My hon. Friend will understand that I cannot commit myself in advance on the view that I shall take on those proposals. I can, however, assure him that I come to the issue with an open, but not empty, mind and that I shall take his views into full account in assessing the proposals and reaching a decision on the way forward.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising limited liability partnership, which is a good example of a matter on which we must listen to all parties, and find a solution based on the balance of public interest. The professions have asked whether it is possible to establish a legal structure that would enable them to do business with limited liability, but with the organisational features of a partnership rather than a company. At present in the UK, they must choose between organising as a partnership, with unlimited personal liability and little public disclosure, or as a company, with limited liability and extensive public disclosure. The key difference from the point of view of the client is that any claim that he may have against a partnership is against each and all the

partners individually. With a company, his claim is against the assets of the company itself. That is why the Companies Acts require extensive public disclosure, particularly about the state of a company's finances.

It is absolutely right that any business entity with a limited liability should be required to disclose information. However, it does not necessarily follow that the internal organisation of all limited liability entities should be exactly the same as that of companies, with directors, share capital and shareholders. Many businesses prefer a partnership structure, particularly when many skilled people wish to join in the ownership of the firm on the basis of the skills that they bring to it, without having to make substantial capital contributions to the firm at the outset.

Many states in the United States of America have legislated in the past few years to make such business vehicles available, with the internal organisation of a partnership but the external obligations of a company. They are being copied by an increasing number of offshore centres such as Jersey, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend. No doubt they hope to attract registration from countries such as Britain whose partnership legislation has been unchanged for more than a century.

It was against that background that the Government announced on 22 May our intention to publish draft legislation on limited liability partnership. I emphasise the two basic principles of our approach. Legislation must provide appropriate safeguards for those dealing with the firm, and its details should be worked out in close consultation with all those affected.

I cannot say today what the precise balance and detail of the legislation will be, but I assure my hon. Friends that; in considering its details, we shall take the most careful account of all the representations that have been made in the public consultation that has just closed. We shall also provide full opportunity for consideration of the details of the draft legislation before it is introduced.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): Can my hon. Friend assure the House that there will be no move to introduce legislation on limited liability partnerships until the Government are satisfied about the quality, substance and robustness of the independent regulatory regime to which he referred?

Mr. McCartney: I assure my hon. Friend that my Department will not publish any Bill, materials or proposals until we are satisfied that they meet the criteria set out in the manifesto and in what I have said this evening. There is no point in my giving commitments tonight and then going back on that promise during consultation on the draft legislation.

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby for his personal contribution to the continuing debate on standards of auditing and of audit regulation. This area is vital for the credibility and reliability of accounts, and so for the competitiveness of the UK. I have listened carefully to him and to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central. I shall bear their remarks in mind when I consider in detail the various aspects of the issue. As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby knows, I am happy once again to offer to meet him and his advisers. I am keen to hear the views of all those with an interest in those important matters, including the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell)—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at twelve minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 18 June 1997

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Welsh Development Agency

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jon Owen Jones.]*

9.34 am

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I am grateful for this opportunity early in the new Parliament to put a focus on one of the key issues that arose from the general election—the failure of the Government, and the Government agencies, to overcome the job shortage in many parts of Wales.

I shall focus on the industrial location strategy of the Welsh Development Agency because the WDA is the main vehicle for delivering new job opportunities in Wales and because its strategy is laid down for it by the Welsh Office. Clearly, with a change of Government, there will now be fresh consideration given to a strategy that is appropriate in the light of the new Government's objectives. No doubt, discussion is currently going on between the Welsh Office and the WDA to that end. My objective in this debate is to spell out what we feel should be that strategy; I hope also to elicit from the Minister what is the Government's thinking on a matter that was central to Labour's general election manifesto.

I make it clear from the outset that I do not come to this debate carrying any baggage of hostility towards the WDA. I have long had an attachment to the agency; I can even claim paternity to it—or at least a share in the paternity. Back in 1970s, Professor Phil Williams and I published an economic plan for Wales in which a national development authority had a central role. I was on the Standing Committee in 1975 when the previous Labour Government brought forward the legislation that set up the agency.

I am the first to acknowledge that, in the 22 years since its creation, the WDA has played a significant role in the economic regeneration of Wales. It has given Wales a vehicle for fulfilling policies of which the regions of England have been understandably envious. It has also demonstrated how a national all-Wales body, working specifically for Wales, can have a direct, beneficial effect on the life and well-being of the people of Wales.

Having said that, I must acknowledge that—especially in recent years—there have been aspects of the WDA's policies with which I have disagreed, although such areas of disagreement have arisen primarily from the strategy laid down by the Welsh Office under the previous Government.

Let me first give some background to the economic context within which the WDA works and seeks to meet its strategic objectives. Wales has experienced a massive change in its employment structure over the past generation. Industries that used to be the backbone of the Welsh economy, such as coal mining and slate quarrying, have been virtually wiped out. Those industries often existed in communities that had almost no other source of employment. We have seen the rundown of agriculture as a source of full-time employment, and the farm labourer has become an almost extinct species. The sea fishing industry, once a major employer along the western seaboard of Wales, has dwindled to a shadow of its former self and in other areas the steel industry has been rationalised, resulting in its employment capacity being a fraction of what it was a generation ago.

We are, therefore, faced with serious endemic problems of long-term unemployment and a lack of job opportunities for those leaving school in both old industrial centres and rural areas. The loss of well-paid jobs in many of those industries has led to a severe decline in the level of personal incomes, so that gross domestic product per head in Wales has fallen from 92 per cent. to only 83 per cent. of the United Kingdom average. Part of that decline is due to the fact that where replacement jobs have been secured, they are often low skilled and sometimes part time—26 per cent. of the Welsh work force is employed in part-time work, which is the highest proportion in the European Union.

In the past decade, there has been a noticeable drop in average weekly earnings in Wales compared with those in the UK. Between 1985 and 1995, average weekly earnings of males dropped from 93.1 per cent. of the British average to 88.5 per cent; and earnings of females from 94 to 91.5 per cent. In the old county of Gwynedd, the drop was far worse: by 1995, Gwynedd males were earning only 83.8 per cent. of the British average and Gwynedd females only 86.1 per cent.

In 1995, men in Wales earned £43 a week less than the British average and women £22 less. To increase those earning levels must become a strategic objective of the WDA and that must be a factor in its industrial location decisions. Activity rates among men have fallen from 91.5 per cent. in 1971 to 81.2 per cent. by 1991. Those factors of low activity rates, high unemployment, low wages and a high level of part-time working have created pockets of acute poverty and deprivation.

That, of course, is not the entire picture for Wales. There are some areas where there has been considerable success in economic regeneration. Along the M4 corridor in southern Gwent and eastern Glamorgan, and along the A55 corridor in Deeside running through into the Wrecsam area, there has been a significant influx of new industry, not least by way of inward investment from overseas. About 50 companies from Japan have set up in Wales, along with many companies from the United States, and most recently we have heard of the immense LG project for Newport. We congratulate the WDA on its success in that area.

It is against that background that we must consider the appropriateness of the job strategy and location strategy of the WDA. That must be considered in geographic, sectoral and structural terms.

Until recently, the guidelines laid down by the Welsh Office for the activities of the Welsh Development Agency accepted that up to 80 per cent. of the new jobs created in or attracted to Wales should be in two target areas, representing less than 10 per cent. of the land area

[Mr. Dafydd Wigley]

of Wales. Those two areas were, first, around the M4 corridor in southern Gwent and eastern Glamorgan; and, secondly, around the A55 corridor in Fflintshire and Wrecsham. It is worth noting that three of the four new counties with the lowest unemployment in Wales are Monmouth, Wrecsam and Fflintshire, all with about 5 per cent. unemployment, and all are counties that coincide with those target areas.

Mr. David Hanson (Delyn): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, irrespective of that point, there is still a high inactivity rate among many people in Fflintshire, Wrecsam and the surrounding areas, and that many people are off the unemployment register and have become long-term inactive for a range of reasons, not least the closure of the pit in my constituency?

Mr. Wigley: I shall shortly discuss the need to get accurate local figures, which were, of course, distorted considerably during the previous Government's term of office.

The WDA strategy defined as acceptable a situation where as few as 20 per cent. of the new jobs should come to the rest of Wales—90 per cent. of the land area of Wales—despite the fact that two thirds of unemployed people in Wales live outside the two target areas.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Is it not an odd proposition that the greatest effort has been made where the need is least and where the locational advantages are the greatest in Wales, which adds to the imbalances within the Principality?

Mr. Wigley: That is the thrust of the argument that I am trying to develop; I accept the hon. Gentleman's point.

Between 1993 and 1996, a total of 134 manufacturing projects in Wales were offered regional selective assistance. Only five of those were in Gwynedd and only seven in Dyfed. That bears out the point that the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) made. That was a wholly unacceptable strategy, whereby Conservative Secretaries of State consigned countless thousands of unemployed people, and especially young unemployed people, to the economic scrap heap. As a result of the failure to establish a strategy and policy that would secure jobs within reasonable travelling distances of their homes—in north-west Wales, in south-west Wales and in the western industrial valleys of Glamorgan—those people have missed out severely.

The more cynical in our midst in Wales suggested that the Tory Government were deliberately using the Welsh Office industrial development budget to create a massive number of new job opportunities in Deeside in the north-east to try to meet the unemployment problems of Liverpool, and in Newport in the south-east to contribute to meeting the needs of Bristol. I readily accept that both those areas undoubtedly have their problems, but it is totally unacceptable that the budget of the Welsh Office should be used to solve their problems.

That deliberate policy of giving priority to securing new jobs in those parts of Wales which, because of geography and transport, were the easiest areas in which to secure employment, as the hon. Member for Swansea, East said, was a cynical betrayal of those areas of Wales where the challenge was that much greater and which required that much more effort to crack the problem. It has led to seething anger in those areas, because people feel that they have been abandoned by the Department of State that was supposed to safeguard their interests—the Welsh Office, which determined the strategy within which the WDA operates. If ever there was an example of why both the Welsh Office and the Welsh Development Agency should be made answerable to a directly elected Parliament of the people of Wales, this is it.

During the last few desultory months of the 18 years of Tory rule, as the last Secretary of State sat in his Welsh Office bunker, awaiting his party's richly deserved annihilation in Wales, there was a deathbed pang of conscience. On 19 March 1997, the Secretary of State adjusted the target figures, so that 50 per cent. of the new jobs might go to the two target areas and the other 50 per cent. should be secured for the other 90 per cent. of the land area of Wales, which includes most of the areas of high unemployment and deprivation. However, in adjusting the Welsh Office strategy for the WDA in that way, no indication was given of how those targets should be achieved.

There is, however, one intriguing sentence in the new guidelines which states that the WDA

"is expected to recognise, within the United Kingdom and European Union limits, the extra costs of locating in areas outside the eastern M4 and A55 corridors".

What does that mean? Does it mean that the WDA can make grants to compensate for geographic disadvantage? If so, by what mechanism and from where is the additional cash to be found? I suggest that the cash found should be ring fenced in the same way as money was ring fenced for the LG project. Money should be ring fenced for the needs of south-west and north-west Wales and for the western industrial valleys.

One of the answers given by the Welsh Development Agency and the Welsh Office in justifying their former strategy has been that many of the footloose international companies, when considering coming to Wales, stipulate that they want to be in one or other of those two corners of Wales and that in trying to persuade them to come to a more westerly part, the WDA might risk losing investment in its entirety. That is, no doubt, because so many of the inward investment projects are manufacturing to sell their products in the main markets of continental Europe and, therefore, want to be strategically located to take advantage of road, rail and air links to continental Europe. It is worth pointing out to little Englanders on both sides of the Chamber that it would be disastrous for the economic regeneration of Wales if we were to withdraw from the European Union.

If attracting industrial projects to more westerly locations than Newport or Wrecsam is impossible for the UK Government, how is it that the Irish Government have succeeded in creating 10 times more new jobs in Ireland in the past five years than the UK Government have succeeded in creating in Wales? Ireland is divided by greater distances and a maritime crossing from the main markets of those companies, but, if the circumstances offered to companies are right, industries can be established and located in such locations.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): I am closely following the hon. Gentleman's argument.

Is it not a fact that most of these large investments are basically assembly plants? Does not the future lie in creating supplier networks out to the communities that he and I are interested in? Those are the role, function and targets that the WDA and Welsh Office are now aiming for. Supplier networks for those large assembly plants that lie along the M4 could be our job future.

Mr. Wigley: Yes, I saw the report in the *Western Mail* yesterday. It is hoped that about half the supplier companies to LG might be in Wales. That is good news and needs emphasising.

I suggest to the House, however, that the Welsh Office and the WDA have accepted far too easily the received wisdom that Newport and Wrecsam are ideally located to sell to Dusseldorf or Milan, whereas Holyhead, Caernarfon, Pwllheli, Ffestiniog, Ammanford or Aberdare are impossibly remote for such a purpose. That is nonsense and reflects much more on the mentality of those who drew up the strategy than it does on manufacturing industry. A small company located in Llanberis in my constituency manufactures medical diagnostic kits, 96 per cent. of which are exported. Llanberis is, in fact, closer in time to Manchester airport than Oxford is to Heathrow.

I would suggest that, with unemployment rates of 14 per cent. in Holyhead and south Pembroke, 12 per cent. in Aberdare and 10 per cent. in Caernarfon and Llanelli, the time has come for a fundamental change in the strategy laid down on the Welsh Development Agency.

It is time for 80 per cent. of the new jobs towards which the WDA or the Welsh Office provide public funding to be located outside the two target areas that have done so well in the past. There should be specific targets for securing new jobs in the western part of Wales, the old counties of Gwynedd and Dyfed, and in the western parts of the coalfield area.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): My hon. Friend makes a very persuasive case about the need to attract jobs into west Wales. I am sure that he would agree that we should also underpin the indigenous industries in those parts of Wales. One of the great dangers that those industries face is that the strategy adopted by the previous Government was to force the Welsh Development Agency to sell its units, many of which are rented by local businesses. They may well be sold over their heads, and they may be charged rentals that they cannot afford if major companies move in. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Welsh Office should address that issue?

Mr. Wigley: Yes. I was just coming to that.

One aspect of the WDA's policy that I should like to highlight concerns the availability of industrial land and buildings. Virtually no strategic sites are available in Gwynedd for inward investment, although I understand that the WDA may be in discussion with the county council on one possibility near Bangor, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Conwy (Mrs. Williams). Why should those sites not already be earmarked? Furthermore, there are no WDA-owned industrial estates in Pwllheli and the Llyn peninsula. In view of that failing, I must ask how the WDA is meeting its obligation to unemployed people and the young jobseekers of Pwllheli and western Dwyfor.

The rents that have been charged in the Cibyn industrial estate in Caernarfon for units ranging between 1,000 sq ft and 3,000 sq ft range between £3.15 and £3.50 per sq ft. The rent being charged for similarly sized units in Amlwch, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones), is £2.50 per sq ft. Amlwch has the advantage of full development area status, which we in Caernarfon do not have. That underlines the need to review these rent levels.

If, in the past, Wales has been regarded as remote from the centres of population, trade and commerce, the advent of modern technology and telecommunications makes such a concept much less relevant. There is no reason why telemarketing call centres and computer-based work cannot take place in the most remote Welsh communities, with the essential product—information transmitted by land line—being sent at next to no cost to any urban centre in Europe or the world. Given the natural verbal skills of the Welsh people, this is perhaps a natural industry to grow in Wales.

I am conscious that the Welsh Development Agency has recognised the need to create a state of the art fibre-optic cabling of Wales as the basis for developing information industries throughout our country. A bid was made for millennium projects support for such an investment a short while ago. Given that the WDA saw that as a priority, and recognised that such an investment would be immensely expensive but also beneficial to the Welsh economy, the question for the Welsh Office now is: how does it intend to take that agenda forward? I doubt whether the Welsh Office budget is likely to have that much money—we are talking about hundreds of millions of pounds. In that case, the investment must be secured from elsewhere.

If we look around for the industrial concerns that may have that sort of money at their disposal, and an active interest in cabling up Wales, we find that there are relatively few contenders. Cable television companies might be interested, but the danger is that they will want only the rich pickings of the populous areas, leaving mid-Wales, north-west Wales and south-west Wales out in the cold. It would be outrageous if the WDA were party to an agreement that discriminated against those areas.

If no cable company were willing to take on such a broad responsibility, might it be possible to persuade British Telecom to undertake it, recognising, of course, that it would need something in return? Might that return emanate from a liberalising of the restrictions on what British Telecom can convey on a upgraded network of telephone lines, which, after all, go into every household? Optic cable links can carry myriad communication elements into every house, including multi-channel television links, interactive commercial links, the information highway and an embryonic element of a diffused and decentralised data processing structure. That, of itself, would enhance the potential of people to work from their own homes; and in an age when we must all be more environmentally conscious, it would minimise the unnecessary transportation of people and products.

The WDA has identified the development of this infrastructure; the challenge now is to take it forward because of its importance to the Welsh economy. Today, we want to know the attitude of the new Government to such developments. What guidelines are they giving the WDA? This is an urgent issue because key decisions are about to be taken and there are specific steps that the

[Mr. Wigley]

Welsh Office and other Government Departments must take to help the countless thousands who are unemployed in Wales.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): Does the hon. Gentleman share my welcome for the Secretary of State's announcement two weeks ago of investment proposals for west and north Wales? Would he further agree that one reason why these areas have fallen into neglect has been the decline in employment in the slate quarries? I think in particular of Bethesda in the Dyffryn Ogwen area, where the trend has been one of gradual decline. Successive Governments have not given those problem areas the attention that they deserve, so the unemployment figures have steadily worsened.

Mr. Wigley: Yes, indeed. The hon. Lady represents an area similar to mine, so she is well aware of the problems. I accept her points.

We need to be clear about the size of the unemployment problem. The official figure for Wales is about 80,000, but I suspect that the true number is between two and three times as high—the labour force survey certainly suggests that.

We need a review of the workings of the Industry Act 1982, because many of the areas formerly designated for industrial development have now done very well indeed. We should not use crude unemployment figures for the purpose; we should factor in activity rate figures, the age structure of the work force, youth unemployment, outward migration to seek work and incomes per head. Consideration should also be given to how the UK industrial development map would best accord with the prospects of maximising help from the European Union. I stake a claim today that the Government should seek objective 1 status for the old counties of Gwynedd and Dyfed within the European Union; a review is currently under way.

There also needs to be a change in emphasis in the WDA between the support given to large companies to come and locate in Wales and the lack of support for small indigenous companies when they want to expand—the very point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones). Time after time, I have heard of small businesses in Wales asking the WDA for assistance but being given no practical help. There is often an initial indication of interest, but then it fizzles out and no cash materialises. It is immensely frustrating for small companies in Wales to hear of millions of pounds being provided through the Welsh Office or the WDA for inward investment projects—sometimes at a cost of £30,000 or £40,000 a job—when they cannot get a brass farthing towards creating a handful of much-needed jobs in some of our scattered communities.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): It is clear that a key element in any strategy for revitalising rural Wales is value addition to our food products. There is a food centre at Horeb in my constituency, established by the local county council, which has applied to the DTI for a grant to set up as a teaching business company. The sum requested is quite small—about £250,000—but the money has not been forthcoming.

Furthermore, the regulations governing the establishment of teaching business companies usually apply to large industrial systems only. Is not that a good example of how we need both the right policies in place and relatively small sums of money to set up enterprises that would be of key importance not just to Ceredigion but to the whole of Wales, as part of a Welsh food strategy?

Mr. Wigley: My hon. Friend touches on an important point. The Development Board for Rural Wales operates in rural and mid-Wales, but in areas such as Dwyfor, Preseli or Dinefwr, which fall within the WDA's remit, there needs to be a more integrated strategy serving the needs of rural Wales.

In developing its strategy, the WDA must, of necessity, be conscious of the resources that we have in Wales. One of those resources is the produce of our agricultural sector. In terms of meat and dairy products, we have a tremendous resource, but it is often too poorly marketed, and the added value in the food chain takes place outside Wales. We look with envy at how Ireland has succeeded in building on its agricultural and food production base. That must surely be an area in which the WDA more positively helps to facilitate development.

We also have the resource of our national University of Wales and of the research undertaken by its scientific and technological departments. Why on earth does such highly regarded research work not lead to more practical benefits, in terms of applied technology and jobs? The contrast between the direct spin-offs—jobs—created around Cambridge in England or Boston in the United States and the lack of such spin-offs in Wales is staggering. Key people in our university often take an academic delight in boasting that their work is not necessarily of relevance to Wales but is of relevance to mankind. That is all well and good, but they should remember that their budgets come from the Welsh expenditure block, and it is not unreasonable that the people of Wales should look to its university to bring back more direct benefits to the Welsh economy.

I mentioned earlier Ireland's success in attracting new jobs. We are, of course, aware that GDP per head in the Irish Republic is not just greater than that of Wales but has overtaken the UK's. We in Wales must learn the lesson from Ireland that it is important to create a skilled work force. The Irish have put substantial resources into education, to ensure that the industrial and commercial skills are there for potential employers. There has been a tragic failure to do that in Wales and throughout the UK. As a result—incredibly—there are high pockets of unemployment in Wales side by side with industrialists who cannot find adequately trained labour.

A strategic consideration, therefore, must be the improved skilling of the Welsh work force; the failure of the TECs in Wales in this context must be brought into the equation. There may be a case for integrating them with the WDA—and integrating part of their work with local authorities—so that the feedback from employers in Wales finds its way directly into the organisation of training and reskilling the work force. Clearly, there must also be a much closer liaison between education and training if this problem is to be solved.

On the need for reskilling our work force, the Government must surely be aware of the academic research that has been undertaken in Cardiff, based on

primary research in Scotland, showing the benefit to the economy from investing in education, which virtually pays for itself. That is of direct relevance to the debate.

I was glad that the previous Government made some progress with regard to establishing training centres in Gwent and Bridgend, although I was sorry that no Welsh educational institution bid successfully for the Bridgend contract, and that we had to go to Swindon to find people who could take on the contract.

Do the Welsh Office and the Welsh Development Agency seriously believe that a training centre in Bridgend will serve the needs of unemployed people in Pembroke Dock or Aberystwyth, let alone Porthmadog, Bangor or Penygroes? If it is their intention that such a centre should serve the whole of Wales, will travelling and residential costs be reimbursed? If, as I suspect, that is not the intention, can we have training centres nearer the people in Wales?

Another target sector that the WDA has identified, but which is being developed sporadically, is the television and film sector. We have a significant infrastructure in film production in Wales already, but I often wonder whether that base has been provided for the development of existing opportunities. One thinks particularly of the film development funds in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. We need something similar if we are to take the maximum opportunity in Wales.

A further sector with a strong track record is marine biology in Bangor, yet we do not get the jobs arising from that.

Because of pressure of time and to allow other hon. Members to speak, I shall curtail my remarks. The work of the WDA must be seen in the context of the resources available to it. Its budget has been severely eroded over recent years. During the Redwood era, the WDA was specifically required to sell off the family silver in order to maintain its statutory responsibilities. That was an outrageous situation and must never be allowed to recur.

The way in which the WDA was starved of cash in terms of grant in aid during the Redwood era is staggering. In 1991–92, the grant in aid stood at £87.5 million. By 1994–95, it was down to £50 million and by 1995–96, it was down to £29.2 million. The WDA had to make up the shortfall by selling its capital assets, but, despite its doing that, the cuts had a direct material effect on the total expenditure of the WDA, which fell from £165 million in 1992–93 to £130 million in 1995–96.

It is true that additional resources have been put in recently, not least because of the need to ensure that money was available for the LG project. The net result is that the revised budget for 1997–98 stands at £152 million, which is below the level of the 1992–93 budget. When one takes into account the fact that some of that money is earmarked for the LG project, it becomes clear that the resources available for the rest of Wales have fallen significantly in real terms.

That is a direct consequence of the dogmatic approach of the previous Government. The incoming Labour Government must give a commitment to avoiding that and to providing adequate funding for the WDA to do its job properly.

We have recently heard about the appointment of the new chief executive, Mr. Brian Willott, and we wish him well in his responsibilities. It is a pleasant change to have a chief executive whose roots are in Wales and who is also prepared to live in Wales.

The WDA has a challenging time ahead. It will face changes in its democratic answerability and, quite possibly, in its structure and remit. All those will develop over the coming months. What is needed now is a clear-cut and decisive strategy geared to providing a fair range of jobs in required numbers within reasonable travelling distance of every community in Wales.

The WDA will need hands-on leadership, from within the Welsh Office and, in due course, from the Welsh Assembly and from its own senior executives. Its success or failure will be measured in terms of the increase in sustainable employment opportunities and in the standard of living and the quality of life in Wales. Its success or failure will be felt most of all by the people of Wales.

From the start, getting the strategy for the WDA right must be a priority for Welsh Office Ministers. We wish the Minister and his team well in their work, as we do the staff of the WDA. Labour was elected overwhelmingly in Wales on a programme of getting jobs for the people. It is now time for the Government to deliver. The WDA is the vehicle for facilitating that delivery. It is time to make it happen, and we hope that that is what the Welsh Office intends to do.

10.3 am

Ms Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate on the industrial location policy of the Welsh Development Agency.

The new seat of Preseli Pembrokeshire was created, in part, from a small section of the previous Ceredigion and Pembroke, North seat, which was ably represented in the House by Cynog Dafis, the first Green party Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom, who has played a prominent role in bringing environmental issues to the fore in debate both here and in west Wales.

The major part of Preseli was inherited from the former Pembroke seat previously represented by my Labour colleague, Nick Ainger, who has shifted slightly east and now represents West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire. My hon. Friend was the third Nick in a row to represent Pembrokeshire at Westminster. In 1992, he defeated the Conservative Nicholas Bennett, who had followed the former Secretary of State for Wales, Nicholas Edwards, on his retirement from the Commons in 1987.

During the five years since 1992, Nick Ainger has earned a reputation as an excellent and hard-working constituency Member of Parliament with a great interest in environmental issues. I have great pleasure in following tradition and paying tribute to his record as my predecessor in the House. His maiden speech referred to the importance of pollution control measures in the burning of fossil fuels, notably proposals to import and burn orimulsion at Pembroke power station—an issue which is on-going and affects his constituency, in which the power station is situated, but has also raised concerns throughout west Wales and further afield.

The environment, together with job creation throughout all sectors of our economy, are without doubt the two most important issues in Preseli Pembrokeshire. The two issues are not separate, but closely interlinked.

[Ms Jackie Lawrence]

Pembrokeshire is a beautiful county, affectionately known by those who live there as Wales's premier county, and for good reason. We have probably the most beautiful coastline in the entire United Kingdom—a fact exemplified by the existence of the Pembrokeshire Coast national park, which was created to protect and conserve that coastline from increasing threats: threats from land use development, as well as the inevitable ecological and environmental pressures from the increasing number of tourists who come to share and enjoy our beautiful county.

Our offshore islands of Skomer, Skokholm and Grassholm are internationally recognised nature reserves. The seas around the island of Skomer are a marine nature reserve, one of only three in the whole of the UK. That designation was awarded in 1990 in recognition of that unique and sensitive marine environment. It is hoped that it will soon be matched by designation as a European special area of conservation.

That will mean that the highest environmental standards are required for any development around our coast, which is vital to protect the livelihood of the many local people who rely on the agriculture, tourism and fishing industries. Insistence on the highest possible standards for development is vital also to restore the balance between the needs of the petro-chemical industry based around Milford Haven waterway and the other sectors of our economy that I have mentioned.

Much as I should like to extol further the virtues of Pembrokeshire, I am conscious that this is an Adjournment debate and that the time available for Members to contribute is limited. I shall outline the problems faced by our local economy and the reason why an effective strategy for regional development is so important to us in Pembrokeshire.

As I said, anyone visiting Pembrokeshire almost always recognises that it is a beautiful place in which to live. However, that beauty masks some serious problems which are just as severe as and, in some cases, worse than those in many more obviously deprived parts of Wales or the UK as a whole.

The population of the administrative county of Pembrokeshire is about 110,000—a figure which census information shows has grown significantly in recent years. It is, however, an aging population. For example, there was a fall of 11.65 per cent. in the number of males in the age group 16 to 24 between 1981 and 1991, compared to a fall of 9 per cent. in Wales overall. Over the same 10-year period, the number of males aged over 65 increased by 27.6 per cent., compared with a Welsh figure of 15.1 per cent. Thus, we have a greater migration of our young people out of the county, but a substantially greater influx of people over retirement age.

From my 20 years living in Pembrokeshire, I know that young people who have grown up in the county would generally like to stay, and leave only because work opportunities are simply not available for them. They face the choice of moving elsewhere to find work, or remaining with no prospect of work, or prospects of wage rates as low as £2.20 an hour or even less. Those figures were outlined by Cardiff business school for west Wales in studies from 1996.

Unemployment figures have been consistently high since the late 1970s and are some of the worst in the United Kingdom. Long-term unemployment increased significantly between 1995 and 1996, despite numerous changes to the way in which the former Government calculated the "official" figures. A recent study commissioned by Pembrokeshire county council estimated that, in 1994, Pembrokeshire had a gross domestic product per head of population of just under £7,000—less than 72 per cent. of the United Kingdom average. That figure had dropped from 84 per cent. in 1984.

Fewer than 10 per cent. of those employed in Pembrokeshire are involved in manufacturing activities, compared with 20 per cent. for Wales as a whole. Between 1981 and 1991, manufacturing industries in Pembrokeshire declined by 12.7 per cent. compared with a 7.8 per cent. decline for Wales as a whole. Our mainstay industries of agriculture, tourism, defence establishments and oil have been hit badly. The former Government's closure of defence establishments at RAF Brawdy, Milford mine depot and Royal Naval armaments depot Trecwn led to the loss of hundreds of direct jobs and millions of pounds from our local economy.

The impact of bovine spongiform encephalopathy has been devastating for our local farmers; a 1996 study estimated an annual loss of £34 million from the south-west Wales economy as a direct result. In November last year, estimates showed that the Sea Empress oil spillage had cost the tourism and fishing industries about £32.7 million. The most recent blow to the people of west Wales is the news that Gulf oil refinery faces possible closure, with the loss of more than 200 direct jobs and a further 2:1 ratio of indirect jobs.

The whole operation of the Welsh Development Agency, including its industrial locations policy, is of immediate interest and concern to my constituents who are desperate for job opportunities and for investment. Earlier this year, before the general election, the former Secretary of State for Wales, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), is reported to have instructed the WDA to point any inward investment to areas of Wales outside the M4 and A55 corridors. Such an instruction should not have been necessary, as the Welsh Development Agency's responsibility is clearly to all of Wales, and not just the south and north-east corners. In fact, the opening paragraph of the chairman's statement in the 1995-96 annual report of the WDA assures us that "the WDA has continued to pursue its mission to promote Wales as the best business climate in Europe by assisting in the growth of quality jobs and competitive industry for the benefit of all the people of Wales."

Unfortunately, we have seen little evidence of that in Pembrokeshire.

Wales requires an economic powerhouse that considers the needs of all areas of Wales—east, west, north, south, urban or rural—without any lines of demarcation. That body would combine the best elements of the WDA with the best elements of the Development Board for Rural Wales in order to cater for the needs of both urban and rural areas of Wales. It should be able to apply the strategy that is most appropriate for the area in which it is working, instead of one strategy or the other in the selective style of the previous Administration.

I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), who represents a Welsh constituency, will be acutely aware of

the frustrations of the people of Wales not just with the industrial locations policy of the WDA, but with the lack of accountability of that organisation. For that reason, I welcome the referendum planned for later this year when the people of Wales will be given an opportunity to say yes to the restoration of democracy within Wales. The expertise of 60 local people in an assembly will ensure that instructions such as that given by the former Secretary of State to the WDA to "go west" are no longer necessary.

Local people know what local people need. The implementation of an element of proportional representation in elections to the Assembly will ensure that people from all localities in Wales have an input—whether the issue is economic development and regeneration, health or education and skills training. The Assembly will not detract from the work of hon. Members in this place or of local government in Wales. It will enhance and complement both and, unlike unaccountable quangos, it will restore the democratic deficit that has increased over the past 18 years—by all accounts, at a cost that is considerably less than that of quangos. It will deliver reduced costs, with democracy for the people of Wales as a bonus.

For the sake of the economic future of my constituency and in order to meet the needs of other areas such as Pembrokeshire that demonstrate problems of both urban and rural deprivation, I am sure that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will consider ways of responding effectively to our needs.

10.14 am

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I congratulate the hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) honestly and sincerely on her maiden speech, which was thoughtful and thought provoking. I am confident that she will prove an excellent Member of Parliament and that the people of Preseli Pembrokeshire will be represented very well.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) on securing time for this debate on a matter that is important for the whole of Wales. In the time available, I shall concentrate on the rural parts of Wales. My hon. Friend has assiduously tackled deficiencies in the Welsh Development Agency over the years. He has offered constructive criticism, rather than simply banging away without offering any helpful suggestions. I am sure that the recent change in direction by the agency and the Welsh Office is due in no small measure to my hon. Friend's efforts.

The Welsh Development Agency's success in attracting high-profile new investment, such as LG in Newport, is most welcome. However, the problems of rural areas present a far more difficult scenario. In effect, a single huge job creator in a populous area will sweep away an enormous percentage of the unemployment figures at a stroke. However, the economy in the other 80 per cent. of Wales will remain utterly reliant on the small and medium-sized sector businesses, without which the economy would collapse. It follows, therefore, that it is far more difficult to attract the medium-sized sector to the pockets of unemployment that are prevalent in many parts of rural Wales.

The situation has been exacerbated of late by the scaledown of labour in the agricultural industry. A particularly worrying aspect is the rate of long-term youth unemployed, which is as high as 33 per cent. in some parts of rural Wales. Addressing that problem must be a priority if we are to build a healthy and viable society in Wales.

It is correct to say that the Welsh economy generally is depressed, with gross domestic product per head at about 83 per cent. of the United Kingdom average, as the hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire said. Low wages are a feature in many industries. Tourism, which is one of the main employers in Wales, remains largely seasonal despite the efforts of many in the industry to encourage expansion into the so-called "shoulder areas" of the year. Wales must also deal with an inferior transport network—indeed, it is hardly a network at all.

Rural Wales is characterised by a population comprising a high proportion of elderly people with a lower proportion of under-45s. Population growth in rural Wales is due largely to the in-migration of mainly elderly people and, as a consequence, service delivery is more costly per head. In addition, the settlement pattern of rural Wales is under threat. Characteristically, Wales has always had a network of small market towns which frequently serve a catchment area of many miles. In the past five years, we have seen a huge growth in the number of large stores—such as supermarkets and hypermarkets—in those towns. They are seeing off the smaller retailers, one by one.

I was among those who called consistently for policy planning guidance notes 6 and 13 to be introduced in Wales without delay. The Welsh Office, under the tenureship of the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), sat on the documents for 12 months after they were introduced in England by the Department of the Environment. During that time, large retail outlets sprang up like mushrooms over huge swathes of rural Wales. We must now come to terms with the consequences of those events.

In seeking to address the particular problems associated with the economic and socio-economic planning for Wales, the Welsh Office should develop a rural strategy, which was so eloquently propounded by my hon. Friend and by the hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire. I consider that we have lessons to learn from the English model, a rural affairs commission similar to that model might be part of the answer. The fact is that the problems of rural Wales are broad based. They never present one single answer, but beg several. A body that brings together all the problem areas and addresses them would be most welcome.

What I have just said will inevitably be taken as a criticism of the Development Board for Rural Wales, but, in truth, the board has performed fairly well within what many of us consider to be a far too limited remit. I recognise that the board has considerable expertise in encouraging growth in the rural economy, but its powers and obligations should be extended. There is no justification for cutting its budget, even if that means thousands of new jobs for the Newport area. I call on the Government to reinstate the board's budget and to extend its remit so that it is better able to fulfil its statutory purpose and obligation to assist in improving

"the economic and social welfare of the people in mid Wales."

The recent market town initiative is most welcome, but I ask the Minister to look again at what the board can offer existing businesses to help them expand. That must be the

[Mr. Elfyn Llwyd]

key to any strategy. I believe that that offers far more potential even than attracting further inward investment. A thorough appraisal of ways in which to invigorate rural Wales and redress its further decline is long overdue.

We need improved public transport, and initiatives such as post buses are most welcome. Our rural post offices and shops are a vital resource. Although some recent rate relief was introduced, further initiatives must be sought. Capital grants must be introduced to assist businesses in rural areas. Support for all rural businesses, be they general stores, garages, public houses or whatever, should be considered, because they are key resources. Any business failure in those sectors inevitably has a serious knock-on effect throughout rural areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Caernarfon referred to information technology and the need to cable up Wales. That is of paramount importance if Wales is to have a truly prosperous future. I believe that time is of the essence, as Wales has great potential for attracting telematic-based firms in rural areas.

One of the particular problems in rural Wales is the need to link up indigenous businesses. Due to the far sightedness of several individuals in my constituency there is a contract shop for connecting businesses. In the past, businesses typically had to import raw materials from the west midlands, but they now find that those same materials are available at a competitive rate within the constituency. Such an initiative is extremely important. I also echo what my hon. Friend said about the transport of goods and people.

We need to think carefully about encouraging real diversification in agriculture. If that means a relaxation of planning procedure, so be it. The national park within which I live must be a living, breathing and expanding area where the communities can live and prosper. We need to redouble our efforts to assist our market towns. Environmental improvements such as those undertaken by the WDA at Llanrwst and currently at Dolgellau are fine as far as they go, but we need to make it more attractive to people to start up in business. We need to remind people that rural Wales has some world market leaders within it. If they can succeed, a new business will also succeed. A far more radical and all-embracing policy is required so that all the key players in rural regeneration are singing from the same hymn sheet.

We have a wonderful quality of life in rural Wales. People must recognise our determination to ensure that businesses prosper. At the moment, I fear that that message is not getting through. I also fear that a drastic rethink is necessary to make Wales, in particular its rural areas, a haven for business start-ups and expansion.

I trust that when the Welsh Assembly is set up it will concentrate on the dire need to refocus and simplify the various efforts to achieve rural regeneration. I believe that the Assembly would be an excellent forum for that and a catalyst for true forward thinking about what is good for Wales.

10.24 am

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): What a happily consensual debate this has been. It is one in which people who represent different parts of Wales have sought to consider constructively its problems and propose solutions.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) on his timely choice for debate because, at the start of a new Parliament, I believe that we are pushing at an open door. I know that when the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), replies, he will fully understand the problems and will seek to address them constructively.

I also want to commend warmly the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence), which was a model of its kind. During the election campaign, I had the privilege of being twinned with Preseli, and my wife and I spent a happy two weeks there at the start of the campaign. I can certainly underscore what my hon. Friend said about the deprivation in her constituency. At one stage, I thought that there was a new candidate standing for election because of the number of boards displaying the name Halifax. That is some indication of the pressures that that constituency has faced due to a combination of factors associated with the oil industry, defence cuts, BSE and other problems that my hon. Friend described so graphically. I know that she will be a worthy successor not only to the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis), who used to represent the northern part of her constituency, and my hon. Friend the Member for West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire (Mr. Ainger), who used to represent the major part of it.

The broad theme of all the contributions has been the same—yes, the Welsh Development Agency has had some successes, but there have also been some major failures. That cannot be laid at its door, because as its name implies, it is an agent and there is a principal behind it—the Welsh Office. By its policies, the Welsh Office has allowed the divide between the more prosperous and less prosperous areas of Wales to increase. In part, that is due to its failure to use the instruments that are available to it, but, worse than that, it has increased the locational advantages of south-east and north-east Wales. Effectively, its policy has been one of failure by omission to use certain instruments to attract developments to those areas that need it. Worse than that, by its policies it has increased the disadvantages of certain areas—disadvantages that have already been described.

I do not intend to ask the Under-Secretary to visit the areas in question because he knows them well. We were delighted by his appointment because he will be a powerful advocate within the Welsh Office for the type of policies that we have mentioned. My hon. Friend need only look at the relevant statistics gathered by the Welsh Office concerning population movement and other demographic factors such as the aging population, the number of young people who leave Wales and the decline in the population in certain areas. They speak for themselves.

The statistics on poverty show how earnings have declined. In my part of south-west Wales, for example, earnings used to be well above the Welsh average because of highly paid steel jobs at Port Talbot, but we are now well below it. That has been a feature of the economic development in south-west and north-west Wales. Other statistics, which relate to economic activity and the comparative financial advantages of certain areas, also speak for themselves. Under the Redwood era, as the hon. Member for Caernarfon has said, the figures were astonishing. Over three years, I think, the Cardiff Bay

development corporation was given by way of grant in aid more than twice the budget that the Welsh Development Agency had for the rest of Wales.

Recently, for example, my city of Swansea was trying to attract a well-known consumer business to the city. Swansea was told, "Yes, we may be interested in coming, but you—the city and council—must match the subsidised price of, and other incentives at, Cardiff bay." The city does not have the resources to do that. Playing on the locational advantages of south-east Wales is causing enormous problems.

There is always a temptation in these debates to be parochial and to get a quick headline in the local newspaper. We must recognise, however, that Cardiff is the flagship. It is the capital of Wales and should be treated accordingly. We must recognise the locational advantages—

Mr. Martin Caton (Gower): Does my hon. Friend agree that partnership between the Welsh Development Agency and other agencies, such as central Government, is essential if we are effectively to create the jobs that we need, especially in the Swansea area? Does my hon. Friend agree also that the WDA let us down extremely badly recently when, having promised us money for the Technium project, the science park at Penllergaer, which is just outside my hon. Friend's constituency, the money was pulled away, along with European money that was already guaranteed? That money went back to south-east Wales. Does my hon. Friend agree that that was regional policy in reverse?

Mr. Anderson: Yes, precisely that. My hon. Friend has produced an extremely good case study. As he says, it is regional policy in reverse. Money was pledged for the science park at Penllergaer. The project involved using the expertise of the local university in a way that the hon. Member for Caernarfon was suggesting. At the 11th hour, however, the money was taken away by the WDA and assigned to the Cardiff area. It was an astonishing decision, and I hope that my hon. Friend will use it as a case study.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister is aware of other examples in the Neath area of regional policy in reverse. Money goes to areas that are already relatively prosperous, its having been taken from areas that are not prosperous. That must be examined.

I adopt all that has been said about proportions. I understand very much what has been said about the deathbed repentance of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) a few months before the general election. The right hon. Gentleman saw the writing clearly on the wall. He said, "I have sinned. My policy has been wrong. Oh Lord, what I would like to do is as follows." That policy has been set down and I re-pose the question asked by the hon. Member for Caernarfon: will the Welsh Office pick up the challenge?

I am talking not of the theoretic undertakings of the previous Secretary of State but of a firm commitment that the investment targets for the WDA will be entirely recast with emphasis being given to the more deprived areas, such as areas west of the golden corridors of the A55 and M4. I want to see that broad commitment accepted in principle. Will my hon. Friend the Minister, in whom we have enormous confidence and think of as the advocate of the areas outside the more prosperous areas of Wales, give us an indication of the ways in which the Welsh Office intends to act? What instruments does it propose to use? I hope that my hon. Friend will underline that we have a new and reforming Government who are prepared to use all the available instruments for Wales as a whole.

10.34 am

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): I congratulate the hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) on making an excellent maiden speech. I have a considerable Pembroke ancestry in my blood and I appreciated what she said.

I am delighted that the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) has initiated the debate. I congratulate the Minister, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), on his appointment as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State. In constituency terms, he is my next-door neighbour.

I shall endeavour to make a succinct speech in drawing attention to a number of areas of strategy that are important for the Welsh Development Agency and the Development Board for Rural Wales.

Various Secretaries of State have used the WDA as the engine of economic development in Wales. That is especially true of the tenure of Peter Walker, one of the better Conservative Secretaries of State, in the mid-1980s. The problem is that locational development has been unequal, with the result that there is a divide. There are many who say that there is little economic development in south Wales west of Bridgend, and there is some truth in that. There is a similar divide in north Wales along the A55.

We have a problem in the western valleys and we have enormous problems in south-west and north-west Wales. There are problems in rural areas. We are in danger, however, of forgetting mid-Wales, which is a huge chunk of the country. There is a great deal of discussion about what goes on in north Wales and south Wales, but the problems of mid-Wales are substantial. Those problems are undoubtedly the result of poor infrastructure. It is unpopular these days to talk about road developments and I would not advocate motorways running throughout Wales, but some improvements to the A470 and A483, especially in the Brecon and Radnor constituency, and in Powys in general, would improve north-south communications and assist economic development without wrecking the environment.

The difficulties facing the rural economy, with up to 25 per cent. of those involved depending on employment that is connected with agriculture, should not be underestimated. The problems of BSE and cuts in the green pound are taking farm incomes down to even lower levels.

We in mid-Wales are especially concerned about the Development Board for Rural Wales and the interface between the DBRW and the WDA in the location of investment. It is vital that the DBRW continues. There is a feeling in mid-Wales that perhaps its days are numbered. I ask the Minister to ensure that it continues. Indeed, it should be developed and given more powers. The problems facing agriculture should be addressed more clearly by the board. Legislation should be introduced to ensure that that happens.

The boundaries of the DBRW should be coterminous with the objective 5b area of the European Union in Wales. There may be a case for extending the board's boundaries.

[Mr. Richard Livsey]

Many upland farms in Wales produce incomes of £10,000 a year or less. With the green pound devaluation and the halving of ewe premiums, incomes could fall to £5,000 per family. There is a great need to provide employment in rural areas to ensure that members of farming families have alternative employment and an alternative income. That means that economic development must be pushed through to many of the more remote rural areas to ensure that employment opportunities exist.

With the advent of a Welsh Assembly, which we all hope and trust will be set up, there is a great need to make up the democratic deficit. We certainly need a rural strategy that includes not only the WDA but the DBRW, the farming unions and the rural counties of Wales—and not only a policy, but a Welsh Office Minister, devoted entirely to the needs of rural areas. Then there could be a coherent strategy for employment and location.

The needs of rural Wales are great and I should like the Minister to assure us that the DBRW will continue to develop, that its budget will not be cut, as has happened over the past 12 months, and that it will be given a fair deal.

10.39 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): This has been what my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) appropriately described as a happily consensual debate. It is not hard to discover why, when we look at all the empty green Opposition Back Benches where Conservative Members would normally be sitting.

Mr. Nick Ainger (West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire): Where are they?

Mr. Hain: There are none left, because they were wiped out in Wales. That is why we can now, at last, tackle the real issues there, such as those raised by the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), whom I congratulate on securing the debate.

The hon. Gentleman raised several important issues that are right at the top of the Government's agenda for Wales. He also made some apt and sharp observations about the call centres and the need to ensure that a broad-band telecommunications network extends right across into north-west Wales. I shall write to him about that, and perhaps we can have a dialogue later.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) on an excellent maiden speech. In fact, I am somewhat jealous because I, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East, was her twin at the election—not that she needed our help, because she secured a bumper majority.

My hon. Friend spoke eloquently about her constituency, which is indeed beautiful. I have good reason to know that, having visited Skomer island with her on Sunday. However, as she eloquently explained, that beauty masks much unemployment and serious economic and structural problems, which the Government will seek to address, but which the Tory Government so shamefully neglected.

To be successful, the Welsh Development Agency needs a clear framework of strategic guidance from the Government, incorporating specific targets on job creation—the levering in of private sector investment, the reclamation of derelict land and the generation of new business for Welsh firms.

The WDA's industrial location policy is based on the economic case for promoting inward investment in Wales—and it has been most successful. The new Labour Government are determined to build on that success.

However, it has been easier to attract inward investors to the south-east and the north-east of Wales. I agree with the hon. Member for Caernarfon about that, and we now need to redress the balance between east and west Wales, and between the south and the north. We are also determined, as the hon. Gentleman said, to locate investment up the valleys. I agree with him there, too.

We must be clear that getting investors into Wales, rather than specifying exactly where in Wales they should go, is the absolute priority. There is stiff competition from other regions of Britain and we simply must offer the best package possible. I do not think that there will be any disagreement about that. If that means having 6,000 LG jobs in Newport, or not having them at all, I am sure that we would all agree that the answer is self-evident. So, while I am second to nobody in my desire to spread prosperity westwards off the M4 and A55 corridors, I also ask for hard-headed realism from everybody in that respect.

Mr. Caton: While my hon. Friend is talking about moving investment westwards, will he join me in recognising the excellent work done by the WDA as the lead partner in developing the Felindre old steelworks site in my constituency, close to the boundary with his own? That must now be one of the premier inward investment sites in Britain, and probably in the whole of Europe.

Mr. Hain: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I assure him that the Government are doing all that we can to ensure that we get major investment in what he rightly calls a premier site.

Foreign direct investment has been, and continues to be, a vital source of new employment opportunities. For this year, the agency has the target of creating or safeguarding 12,500 jobs, almost two thirds of which—8,000 jobs—will come from inward investment. Half those new jobs will be outside the eastern M4 and A55 corridors.

The benefits are not limited to jobs. Overseas companies have brought new skills, new technologies and new products that have been of wider benefit to the Welsh economy. For example, home-grown firms have entered the supply chains of the overseas companies, thus creating and safeguarding further jobs. The new arrivals have also been able to learn from our businesses, so the benefits have flowed both ways.

We must look forward as well as back. The Welsh economy today faces challenges very different from those of 20 years ago.

Mr. Wigley: Before the Minister moves on to the general forward-looking bit of his speech, may I underline

what I said earlier about the guidelines issued by the Welsh Office on 19 March, which said:

"The targets set out below"—

that is, with regard to how many of the jobs should be outside the two pockets—

"reflect this and the Agency is expected to recognise, within the UK and EC limits, the extra costs of locating in areas outside of the eastern M4 and A55 corridors."

That is deliberately specified, to try to attract companies that would otherwise want to go to those pockets—although, of course, as the Minister said, we would not want to lose them altogether. Presumably, that means giving some inducements to meet the extra costs. Can the Minister tell the House what the mechanism for doing that will be?

Mr. Hain: We have a delicate balance to strike here, and we intend to use all the levers available both to the WDA and to the new Government to ensure that we get extra investment in north-west Wales. If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I would rather leave it at that at the moment.

It is also vital—

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): I am sorry to spoil my hon. Friend's flow, but I have here some figures from the Library, obtained by my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane), which suggest that employment and inward investment in north-west Wales are not quite as bad as they were portrayed earlier. There were 1,500 jobs in Anglesey and Gwynedd, and 4,700 in Wrexham and Flintshire.

The real problem area seems to lie in between, in Denbighshire and Conwy, where only 400 jobs were created last year. That is probably something to do with whether the local authorities are submitting projects to the WDA. Will my hon. Friend say something about those problems?

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. The duty Government Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones), muttered to me earlier from a sedentary position that there was high unemployment in Cardiff, too. Indeed, there is, but we do not want to get into a competitive auction. We must seek to do the best for all parts of Wales, and I think that there will be unity on that subject among Members here today.

The issue, however, is the imbalance of inward investment. The hon. Member for Caernarfon made a valid case.

Dr. John Marek (Wrexham): Can my hon. Friend consider the problems caused in north-east Wales. too? A *Western Mail* article by Darren Waters quotes the Secretary of State as commenting on the appointment of the new WDA chief executive, Mr. Willott, as follows:

"I want to see more jobs created in the Valleys and in the western and north-western parts of Wales. I want a new focus on the growth of existing businesses".

Of course, that leaves out Cardiff, which is central to the concerns of the Government Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central, and leaves out north-east Wales, too.

The Secretary of State also left out the area described by my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones), the Vale of Clwyd and the areas in between.

The Minister would do a service for all of us in Wales if he gave a categorical—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman should know better. He is making a speech, rather than an intervention.

Dr. Marek: May I finish my sentence, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman may go no further.

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Dr. Marek) speaks eloquently for his constituency. It is a matter not of taking jobs away from north-east Wales, but of ensuring that the imbalance is corrected and that we have an investment strategy that supports all parts of Wales. More jobs will be created in north-east Wales.

I am pleased to make an announcement that will be of particular interest to my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones). Comtek Electronics and Lasar Cutting Services are bringing new jobs to north-east Wales. Their projects will create almost 100 new jobs, involve the investment of more than £2.5 million extra finance, and will be welcome additions to the communities in north-east Wales.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): I welcome my hon. Friend to the Front Bench and congratulate him on that announcement and on the hard-headed, realistic way in which those jobs have been steered towards my constituency. They are much needed, because we have considerable long-term unemployment. We also have Deeside industrial park, which we need because we are still coping with the consequences of losing 8,000 steel jobs. I thank the Minister most sincerely.

Mr. Hain: I thank my hon. Friend. One of the reasons why such investment has come to north-east Wales is his diligence on behalf of his constituents.

It is vital that Welsh goods and services are competitive at home and abroad. With Wales exporting twice as much as it imports, it is truly part of the global economy, and we must pay particular attention to our key markets in Europe. Indeed, many United States, Japanese, European and now Korean companies chose to set up in Wales to service the European market. The Government's positive approach to Europe was triumphantly shown in the early hours of this morning by the outcome of the Amsterdam summit. That will provide existing and potential investors with further confidence that Wales is the right place from which to do business in Europe.

Inward investment is, therefore, an important component of the globalisation of the Welsh economy. However, we are pressing for a fairer distribution of inward investment throughout Wales, particularly in west and north-west Wales, but also in the south Wales valleys.

I underlined the importance that I attach to inward investment when I met Mr. Joseph Jun, the European President of LG, together with his colleagues, Mr. C. B. Kim and Mr. S. H. Kim, two days ago. I was impressed

[Mr. Hain]

with their dynamism and they expressed confidence in the partnership approach that the new Labour Government and their agencies are providing. We agreed that we would like as many LG suppliers as possible to locate in Wales, up the valleys and northward and westward. That could bring a further 15,000 quality jobs. Of the 48 companies so far identified as suitable suppliers to LG, 19 are in south Wales, six are in west Wales and two in north Wales. There is potential for the whole of Wales, and we shall work hard to ensure that the Welsh Development Agency and the Welsh Office have the right strategy.

The Welsh Development Agency's strategic target for the number of jobs created or safeguarded outside the eastern M4 and A55 corridors was increased for 1997–98 from 20 to 50 per cent. of its overall target of 12,500 jobs. I strongly endorse that target.

The hon. Members for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) and for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) made powerful points about the state of the rural economy in Wales. The Government are conscious of that problem and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State would welcome discussions with hon. Members who represent rural areas in Wales to agree on a concerted approach. I agree with the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy about post offices, which play a vital role in rural communities.

Mr. Livsey: Will the Minister assure us that the Government's policy is the same as that stated by the present Secretary of State on 10 February? He said that he had no plans to abolish the Development Board for Rural Wales. Is that still the Government's policy?

Mr. Hain: We recognise that the Development Board for Rural Wales performs an important job, and we want to ensure that there remains a strong rural focus in economic and investment activity. We are reviewing all the quangos in Wales, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman would expect us to, given the loss of public confidence in quangos. The DBRW is obviously one of those that we are reviewing.

I expect the Development Board for Rural Wales to give priority to the west of its area. At least 55 per cent. of its programme expenditure will be concentrated in that area by 1999–2000 and we expect that at least 40 per cent. of the jobs to be created this year will be outside Powys, increasing to 40 per cent. by the millennium.

Mr. Dafis: I am sure that the Minister recognises, as we all do, that higher education—both teaching and research—has a key role to play in revitalising the Welsh economy. He will also be aware that there is deep concern and some bitterness in higher education circles in Wales about the way in which its funding has been cut, which has put it at a serious disadvantage compared with higher education in England. Some of those cuts have been made because of the need to provide significant sums, especially for the LG project. Is that not an example of the imbalance in industrial development strategy?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions in this debate are very long.

Mr. Hain: The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) makes important points, which will be taken into account.

Both the WDA and the DBRW fully recognise the importance of this push to the west and north-west, and both agencies are represented on the North Wales economic forum, which has an important role in co-ordinating these efforts in the region. I look forward to the launch of the new South-West Wales economic forum, which will play a similar role. I think that that will deal with many of the points raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire, for Swansea, East and for Gower (Mr. Caton). The Secretary of State and I will shortly be meeting the North Wales economic forum, with which we want to work closely in regenerating north Wales.

All partners should work closely together to ensure that each region and area of Wales is able to maximise its potential for attracting investment. I will be working to ensure that Wales gets the best deal from any review of the assisted areas map. It is essential that we proceed on that.

However, the most important component of all is the right people with the right skills, as LG's senior managers stressed to me on Monday. The people of Wales are our biggest asset. They are the reason why Wales has been so successful, and that drives the WDA's efforts to bring jobs and projects to Wales. We are keen to upgrade the skills level in the Welsh work force still further. But we need not only a highly skilled work force: it also has to be the most flexible.

There are formidable challenges ahead if Wales is to preserve its position as one of the leading locations for investment in Europe. Our partners in the European Union are now more alive to the benefits of inward investment than they were five or certainly 10 years ago. The economic reforms in eastern Europe make those countries formidable competitors for global investment. Recently in my own constituency, Lucas shifted 500 assembly line jobs from Neath to Poland where wage costs were 60 per cent. cheaper. The only way Wales can rise to this challenge is by being the best—not necessarily the cheapest, but the best. To be the best, we must have the most skilled and flexible work force and be at the leading edge of technological advance.

Our strategy must include rationalising or abolishing quangos and making them more democratically accountable to a new Welsh Assembly. That will strengthen existing partnerships, especially with local government. We want more power and decision making to be devolved to the regions of Wales. That will help to spread inward investment more evenly across the whole of Wales.

We want closer ties between the companies that choose to invest in Wales and the communities that will serve them, so as to boost the prospects of the rural and more remote parts of Wales, which are a priority for the Government.

If inward investment is crucial, so, too, is in-Wales investment. The development of home-grown firms is more important than ever before. Most of the jobs growth in modern economies is in small and medium-sized

businesses. I shall meet the North Wales Federation of Small Businesses tomorrow to discuss how the Government can support its activity.

I have also asked the WDA and Welsh Office officials, and the other institutional agencies, to discuss how we can advance the proposals for a new economic powerhouse that will be contained in our White Paper on devolution next month. Businesses and their workers in Wales need a Welsh Assembly to give them a real voice in winning new jobs and investment opportunities; otherwise, Wales will fall behind.

This has been an important debate. The consensus demonstrated in it should now be built on, and a new Welsh Assembly should be formed to secure the extra investment, economic activity and jobs to ensure that Wales becomes a world-beating economy.

Bosnia

10.59 am

Mr. Keith Hill (Streatham): I congratulate the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd)—who will reply to the debate—on his appointment. He and I have fought shoulder to shoulder on human rights issues in the past, not least in regard to Nigeria. I know that his response will be informed both by personal concern to resolve the human rights tragedy that is Bosnia and by the Government's wider concern to secure peace and stability in that part of Europe. Indeed, the one cannot be achieved without the other.

I do not intend to make a long speech. As I anticipated, the debate has attracted some interest among other hon. Members, and I look forward to hearing the contributions of those who, unlike me, have direct and personal experience of Bosnia.

I am pleased to have secured a debate on Bosnia now. It is nearly a year since the House last had a substantive debate on the subject, and we are evidently at a crucial moment in international decision making on the future of the country. In 12 months' time, the mandate of SFOR, the stabilisation force, runs out, and discussions are under way between Governments on its future. I shall argue strongly in favour of the maintenance of a large and powerful international military force in Bosnia. I know of no observer of the Bosnian scene who believes that withdrawal would be anything other than an unmitigated disaster for the region. I shall also argue, however, not only that the international force should stay but that its mandate should be widened as quickly as possible to allow it to undertake more direct responsibility to support the civil agenda of the Dayton agreement.

There are other reasons why this is the right time for a review of the international community's role and SFOR's mandate in Bosnia. In Britain and France—two of the three main military contributors to SFOR—we now have new centre-left Governments, who might reasonably be expected to take a more positive stance on human rights in Bosnia. At the end of this week, the new United Nations high representative, Carlos Westendorp, assumes his responsibilities. On 24 June, the international donor conference will meet, with the aim of raising £1 billion in economic aid for Bosnia. It is essential for that conference to commit itself absolutely to the principle of conditionality in the aid package. In other words, aid should be disbursed only as a condition of the implementation of the civil agenda of Dayton by the Bosnian entities.

We are also in the run-up to the municipal elections in Bosnia, which are set for 13 and 14 September. The 1996 legislative elections, also conducted under the supervision of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, were deeply flawed, particularly in relation to the right of displaced persons to vote in their place of origin. The OSCE is now asking for, and receiving, additional funds to oversee the elections. It claims that it is only approving candidates who make a declaration of acceptance of the Dayton peace agreement, but that claim needs to be validated. There must be renewed efforts to give voting rights to displaced persons, and the OSCE's work must be subject to intense international scrutiny. It is vital for the municipal elections to meet acceptable

[Mr. Keith Hill]

international standards, in a way in which the Croatian elections—also monitored by the OSCE this week—evidently did not.

The final and most important reason why this is the right time to review the direction of international policy and the role of SFOR is the evidence of a renewed American commitment in Bosnia. Just over two weeks ago, when she visited Bosnia, the United States Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, suggested that the United States was in Bosnia for the long haul, and left open the possibility that some American troops could remain there after next summer. I hope that the British Government will welcome and encourage those indications of continuing US involvement, which would be best served by a continuing US presence on the ground in the form of combat troops. If, however, the United States will not lead on the ground after mid-1998, it is essential for the major European powers to plan now for their own force in Bosnia for as long as it takes to fulfil the Dayton objectives.

It is right and proper to recognise the important achievements of both the original international force, IFOR, and its successor, SFOR, in fulfilling the military objectives of Dayton. The ceasefire was effected, and has been sustained. In some areas, there has been a transfer of authority. A zone of separation has been created, and the inter-entity boundary has been effectively patrolled and policed. I pay tribute to the thousands of British troops who have played their full part in those achievements.

A number of other military aspects of the Dayton agreement remain unfulfilled, however. De-mining has yet to begin in earnest. It is acknowledged, in the present circumstances, that further progress in implementing the sub-regional arms control agreement will be difficult, with Republika Srpska continuing to resist its obligation to destroy large numbers of tanks and heavy weaponry. The critical weakness in Bosnia, however, has been the near-total failure on the civil agenda of the Dayton peace agreement: the establishment of national institutions, freedom of the media, freedom of movement and, above all, the return of the refugees and the arrest of the war criminals.

The scale of the continuing refugee disaster in Bosnia was described in a recent report by the international crisis group entitled "Going Nowhere Fast". In the 16 months since the Dayton peace agreement came into force, only about 250,000 refugees and displaced persons have returned to their homes, almost exclusively to areas where they form part of the majority group. In the same period, a further 80,000 people have been displaced, largely during the transfer of territory between the two entities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole, some 750,000 people remain displaced, of whom roughly 450,000 are in the federation and 300,000 in Republika Srpska.

It is important to understand that, in seeking solutions to the refugee crisis in Bosnia, we are seeking solutions for Muslim and Serb refugees alike. Nor should we forget the 160,000 Croat refugees who have sought refuge in Croatia, and who are part of a Bosnian refugee diaspora which numbers 250,000 refugees in the Federal Republic of Serbia and 315,000 in Germany. To add to the crisis, in late 1996 the western European states, starting with Germany, began proceedings to deport Bosnian refugees. As a consequence, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees expects up to 200,000 refugees, half of them from Germany, to return to Bosnia and Herzegovina this year. Unless action is taken now to enforce the return home of refugees, the total number of refugees and displaced persons in Bosnia will grow to nearly 1 million by the end of 1997. The situation is getting worse, not better.

That further build-up of refugees will mean more human misery and greater political tension, especially in the federation area. Of course, there are physical obstacles to the return of the refugees, such as the destruction of property and infrastructure. Those must be dealt with by the international aid programme, and it goes without saying that all housing and infrastructure reconstruction programmes must be linked to the return of minorities.

The major impediment to the return of refugees is the continuance in power of the nationalist authorities and, in some places, of indicted or suspected war criminals. It is unrealistic to leave the responsibility for guaranteeing the security of returning minorities to local authorities, many of whom ethnically cleansed them from their respective regions in the first place. That is why, first, the international community needs to ensure that there are far more human rights monitors on the ground to oversee and facilitate the return process.

If what the international crisis group describes as the "vicelike grip" of the nationalist parties is to be broken to help minorities go back to their homes, the issue of war crimes has to be tackled head on, and those indicted by the international tribunal for former Yugoslavia must be arrested, surrendered to the tribunal at The Hague and prosecuted. Of 75 indicted war criminals in all parts of Bosnia, only nine have been arrested and two prosecuted so far. More than 50 remain at large in Republika Srpska. Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic are both charged with genocide and crimes against humanity. While such men remain at large and their apparent immunity from arrest confers continuing legitimacy on the ethnic cleansers, there will be no return of refugees.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): The question arises, who will do the arresting in that situation? It will not be easy.

Mr. Hill: On this, as on most issues, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a difficult issue and one which I shall address later.

I greatly welcome the Minister of State's recent strong affirmation of support for the international tribunal at his meeting with its president, Judge Cassese, on 10 June. My hon. Friend was right to say:

> "Effective implementation of the Dayton agreement will continue to be severely undermined so long as those indicted for horrific war crimes remain free."

However, it is unrealistic to expect the Bosnian authorities to surrender them, because, all too often, these are the very people who are inculpated in the same crimes. In practice, only the international authorities and, specifically, the military authorities can affect these arrests. Nobody who has read the weekly human rights updates from the office of the high representative can help but be impressed by its extensive intelligence about human rights abuses in all parts of Bosnia.

As for the military, the soldiers know when Karadzic is in his villa, they know the roads that he uses and they recognise him when he goes through their checkpoints.

They are in a position to arrest him, and that is why I say that either SFOR must interpret its existing mandate more robustly or its mandate must be extended immediately to include the arrest of war criminals. Moreover, I suspect that that is the direction in which thinking in the international community is already moving.

The retiring high representative, Karl Bildt, has made clear his belief that at some point military force will be needed to deliver the war criminals to The Hague. His successor, Carlos Westendorp, has said that every effort must be made to bring them to the court and that he is examining new ways and means of producing results. I note that, at the end of this week, the Assembly of the Council of Europe will carry a resolution calling on SFOR to take immediate action to apprehend and transfer indicted persons to the international court.

Of course, such moves will carry risks, and I have no desire to underestimate them, but risks also result from inaction. If there is no individual accountability for war crimes and no return of displaced persons, who can doubt that a Palestinian mentality will develop among young Muslims, with the likelihood of a return to war in 10 or 15 years? Accepting the status quo of effective partition, which is likely in its turn to encourage moves to further rationalisation of frontiers, would be the least stable option.

SFOR must stay. Its withdrawal in present circumstances would be unthinkable. However, it must do more than just hold the ring. It could hold it for ever if nothing happened inside it, and we all know that the international community would not be willing to keep troops there indefinitely, with all the likely consequences of recurring conflict in the region. To ensure that a term is set for the presence of troops in Bosnia, SFOR must take action now to bring the indicted war criminals to trial and to create a secure environment for the return of refugees.

In their excellent mission statement, the Government have said that they will put human rights at the heart of their foreign policy. We are in a powerful position to do that in Bosnia by playing our full part in the implementation of the civil agenda of the Dayton peace agreement.

11.15 am

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this debate, which some months ago would have seemed a somewhat unlikely scenario. Events in Bosnia do not appear much in our newspapers or on our television screens, but that does not mean that the war is over. More likely, it is like a cancer in remission which may renew itself.

Looking back on that terrible period of three and a half years and the diplomacy that limped alongside it, I was sometimes left with the impression that we were watching a symbolic action, half-measures that were intended only to keep the war off the front page no matter how many people it was killing out of sight. It was Band-Aid diplomacy and it did not work.

I think that we have learnt some lessons: there is no point in enduring such ordeals unless we do. The United Nations now has a lessons-learned department. Perhaps in our minds we, too, should have such a department. There are two lessons that I shall mention at this time when we must look ahead to the continuation of SFOR or, if the worst happens, SFOR walking away. One of the lessons is that in the Balkans force prevails. It was the force of the Serbs which prevailed against the Muslims at the start of the war, and the force of the Croats which prevailed against the Serbs at the end of the war. The force of IFOR imposed a kind of peace.

What is important is not so much the structure of the force as its attitudes. When IFOR came in on 21 December 1991, it did so with exactly the same troops and equipment as had previously been assigned to the United Nations protection force—the UN force that failed. The extra tanks, artillery and troops had not yet arrived. The significant issues were the changes in command, in attitude and in helmets from the blue of the United Nations to the camouflage of IFOR.

The other lesson that we have learnt or must learn is that just as actions have consequences, so has inaction. Decisions that were rolled over, deferred or delayed from one meeting to another of the Security Council or the Council of Ministers cost lives. I was close to the situation on the ground and it seemed to me that the problem did not relate to conspiracy or evil interference from outside; it was a problem of indifference. How else do we account for the bombardment of Vukovar and Dubrovnik in November 1991 without penalty? How else do we account for the European Community decision in December 1991 unilaterally to recognise Croatia, although the likely effect of that in igniting a war in Bosnia had been accurately predicted by Lord Carrington and by Mr. Perez de Cuellar, who was then in his closing days as the distinguished Secretary-General of the United Nations? I just note that the British concession to the Germans on the issue of the recognition of Croatia came within days of the German concession to the British on the opt-out clauses of the Maastricht treaty. Historians will one day have something to say about that.

Again, in these past few days in Amsterdam, we have properly been concerning ourselves with events at the heart of Europe, but let us not forget events at the rim of Europe. There were livelihoods at stake in Amsterdam; there are lives at stake in Bosnia. We now have to discuss the composition of SFOR and possibly its renewal and even its walking away. It is reasonable to suppose that the heavy weapons, the tanks and the heavy artillery pieces can now be withdrawn. They are high-impact weapons and they do not make much difference to the overall mix of forces, but I am convinced that, if SFOR goes, the war will start again and the partition of Bosnia will become permanent.

We should take note of what has been achieved, yes, by the United Nations, the discredited UN. By my estimate, it saved 100,000 lives; 100,000 people would be dead but for the bravery of UN troops, who pushed their mandate to the limit and beyond, and risked their lives to save those people. I pay tribute also to the dedicated soldiers of IFOR and SFOR. Having been close to them for all those years, I have come out with a profound admiration for the British Army, which I would now call, from what it has done there alone, the best little Army in the world.

So much depends now on the leaderships in Belgrade and in Zagreb and on whether they finally live up to their obligations under the Dayton agreement. The test is simple: will they hand over the suspected war criminals whom they harbour? The international war crimes tribunal is running out of momentum and is short of evidence, money and, most of all, arrested suspects. My hon. Friend

[Mr. Martin Bell]

the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) has given the numbers, which are disgraceful. The two men so far convicted were small fry. Only one man in a leadership position is held in custody—Tihomir Blaskic, the former leader of the HVO, the Bosnian-Croat forces in central Bosnia, in the side war among Bosnians, Croats and Muslims from 1993–94.

As I may be a witness in that case, I will have no more to say about it, but I wish to impress on hon. Members my conviction that if one of the leading figures is not arrested within the next six months, the international criminal tribunal will in effect be out of business, with repercussions for years to come. It may be that there was a time for peace with justice, and that was in the spring and summer of 1992, and that now we can have peace or justice but not both.

Mr. Dalyell: May I ask my hon. Friend for his answer to the question that I put to my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill): who is to do the arresting? Does my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton have any qualms about it? He has great knowledge of this subject, and I put that point as a question rather than as an assertion.

Mr. Bell: I thank my hon. Friend. I distinguish between those suspected war criminals at large in the present Yugoslavia and those in Croatia, where there are fully competent authorities and there is no international force to do the arresting. There are grave risks in arresting the two principal figures we are talking about, which is why I said that we may have to accept that there can be peace or there can be justice, but there cannot be both. It would be a risky and dangerous undertaking and there is no good course of action. All we can hope for is to find the least worst. If the right occasion presents itself, and it would be easier in the case of Karadzic than in that of Mladic, something might be achieved at acceptable risk, but that has to be advised by the competent military authorities on the ground and we have to live with their advice.

What can we do in the House? We can support the peacekeepers and the peacemakers and the clearance of mines. We can continue with perseverance and patience and not give up, and we should never again return to a distracted diplomacy or to the politics of inattention.

11.24 am

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): One of the truths of the House of Commons is that someone almost always knows a great deal more about a subject than oneself. Never was that more emphatically true than in my relationship with my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) because he is an expert who has educated us all. To be candid, my only reason for speaking is that, over the Whit recess, at their invitation, I visited the Scots Dragoon Guards, my former national service regiment.

I should like to mention my only other contribution on Bosnia. *Hansard* records me saying this during the speech of the late Julian Amery:

"I am listening with fascination, as I have done on many occasions for the past 30 years. From the right hon. Gentleman's experience, would he say that to commit troops, albeit with United Nations berets, into that mire, would beg the question: in what circumstances could those troops ever be withdrawn?"—[*Official Report*, 5 March 1992; Vol. 205, c. 471.]

I speak as someone who, perhaps misguidedly and, perhaps in retrospect, wrongly, was against committing British troops into the mire of Yugoslavia. Five years later, having been there, in no way could I do other than support the assertions of my hon. Friends the Members for Streatham (Mr. Hill) and for Tatton. It would be totally irresponsible to withdraw British troops in the circumstances.

I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton in saying that inaction as well as action has consequences. My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham was clear about that and it is doubtless true. Without wishing to create mischief, I should also like to follow something else that my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton said. He said that it was coincidence—he put it very gently—that Maastricht negotiations coincided with agreement on a quid pro quo on Croatia. Having been there and talked to people, one realises that that recognition caused much of the trouble—not all the trouble, but much of the trouble.

It should be said in the House that Douglas Hurd owes if not us, at least history, some explanation of what happened because I am afraid that history will record that it was a very shabby deal that was extremely expensive in terms of human life and human tragedy.

I also share the profound admiration for the effectiveness of the British Army in this situation, which relates to the other question that I should like to raise. It is not of such a momentous nature as those raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Streatham and for Tatton, but it involves the conditions of British service men. I know that this is not a Foreign Office responsibility—it is a Ministry of Defence responsibility. This country honestly should do its best for those in the service of the UN or NATO in situations such as Bosnia. On Monday, I asked my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence:

"Could the difficult old question of local allowances for our service men in the British Army of the Rhine, who have had to leave their families behind in Fallingbostel or elsewhere, be reconsidered? When they go to Bosnia, they lose the allowances that they had in Germany. Can my right hon. Friend imagine the wry smiles of the men of B squadron of the Scots Dragoon Guards when they learn that the Canadians, with whom they are doing manoeuvres"—

in the Baraci area—

"get free telephone calls for as long as they like to Canada, whereas the Scots'"—

and this goes for all regiments—

"telephone calls are financially restricted?"

In this day and age and in such circumstances, surely we could do something about telephone calls because troops in dangerous situations deserve the best.

I will not bore the House by quoting all my right hon. Friend's reply, but his last sentence was:

"We shall keep these issues under permanent review."—[*Official Report*, 16 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 5.]

The other issue that I wish to raise relates to local allowances. A married sergeant with no children, living in Germany, receives £11.05 per day. When he is deployed out of theatre, the allowance is £7.39 per day—a reduction of £3.66. It is all very well saying that he does not have the expense of living in Germany, but that is not the whole story because his family remains in Fallingbostel. My understanding is that the expenses for a family are exactly the same, if not more, when the husband is away. It is a minor matter, but I plead with

the Government to consider it. We must behave properly towards our troops, whose work my hon. Friends the Members for Tatton and for Streatham and I greatly admire.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tatton will understand when I say that pictures and descriptions on television or in newspapers cannot convey the horror that is Bosnia. The Scots Dragoon Guards took me to the little village of Geselo, where every house had been systematically and efficiently burnt out. I was told that bodies were systematically and efficiently thrown into the river. It was the eradication of a human community. Until one stands there and sees all that—I do not want to be fanciful, but the proverbial ghost is all around—one cannot imagine the horror of what has happened.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): My hon. Friend may be aware that I am an old Bosnia hand. Does he acknowledge that, in addition to the security that has been achieved by IFOR and SFOR, a great deal of vital reconstruction work is taking place? It is a vital element of the Dayton process. Edinburgh Direct Aid, which has volunteers from both my hon. Friend's constituency and mine, is currently involved in reconstructing buildings and making places habitable so that refugees can return to them. It is vital to try to rebuild some sort of civilised society out of the disaster that my hon. Friend has described.

Mr. Dalyell: I certainly acknowledge what my hon. Friend has said.

I will not take up any more of the House's time as I have explained my change of mind from five years ago.

11.33 am

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): As a member of the North Atlantic Assembly for the past five years, I have been in a unique position to hear first hand, from both the military and high-ranking officials, about the problems facing Bosnia and the problems of implementing the Dayton agreement. I cannot speak with the same experience and eloquence as the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell). I closely followed his work as a journalist in Bosnia and read many of his reports. I agree that someone must take responsibility for the European Union's ill-fated decision to recognise Croatia. History will tell the truth about that shameful episode.

From the beginning, I have believed that Dayton was created out of a desperation to do anything to end the killing. Different roles were assigned to different organisations—for example, NATO was brought in to end the armed conflict. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), I was deeply worried about sending in British troops. I do not think that we need to apologise for that because it is an awesome responsibility for a Member of Parliament. I was also deeply worried about NATO's involvement because of certain attitudes towards the Russians. However, at the end of the day diplomacy won and the policy of inclusivity with the Russians has been one of the successes. There has also been some short-term success in bringing the killing to an end and in controlling, to a certain extent, some of the arsenals in accordance with Dayton.

I agree with the views of Catherine Walker, deputy chief of the UNHCR mission in Sarajevo, who earlier this year warned:

> "The Dayton agreement is only a skeleton, it does not take human nature into account. However, hearts and minds of people do not change so rapidly as Dayton would suppose. The reconstruction of the minds and spirits is very slow and is not really taken care of."

It is a task for not only the civilian organisations but the international community. We must recognise that the healing process will take a very long time.

Any stability that has been established in Bosnia is still fragile and a number of urgent issues must be addressed. For Britain and other NATO members, the question is what would happen if the international forces were withdrawn in 1998. Although the crisis management that NATO implemented has succeeded to an extent, how do we get out of Bosnia? Whenever we send in our troops, I always ask, "How do we withdraw and what do we leave behind?"

We must consider the issues of Bosnia fatigue—the media appear to have lost interest in what is happening in Bosnia—and of public opinion in other countries. How long will the political will to stay in Bosnia remain? One reason why I welcome this debate is that it puts Bosnia back on the agenda. We must be honest about what is happening there and how limited the holding of the line is.

Although the work of the civilian organisations is desperately important, it has been painfully slow and enormous tasks remain. The whole of the former Yugoslavia is moving from a command economy to market-based capitalism, and we need to think about that. There are almost 2 million refugees in the former Yugoslavia, with about 1 million in Bosnia alone. The resources to rebuild that shattered country are scarce. I commend the military for its reconstruction work on schools, on its small-scale infrastructure projects and on getting some of the factories back into operation.

We need to stop ethnic enmities breaking out again. We know that, every now and again, ethnic violence erupts. For example, the Croats attacked the Muslims in Mostar and the Serbs destroyed Muslim homes in Republika Srpska. At one point, I was very concerned about the wholesale attempt to make the Serbs into lepers—the hated people of the former Yugoslavia. That is a tragedy. Of course, the leaders are evil and want locking up, but the people have been subjected to foul propaganda and we should not isolate them. If we do, they will huddle together and follow the same leaders. We should not judge the people; we should have gone over their leaders' heads many years ago and talked to those who want peace. The international community should not have given the leaders the credence that it did.

The police force in Bosnia is a cause of major problems. Some 75 per cent. of all human rights violations in Bosnia are perpetrated by the police, so an international police force is necessary. Annexe 1B of the Dayton agreement mentions arms reduction, which is not going as well as we expected. The last thing we want is more arms entering Bosnia; arms reduction should be at the top of the agenda.

Bosnia, like other parts of the world, has a massive problem with de-mining. That problem should concentrate all our minds. I congratulate the Government on their clear statement on land mines. Nothing heartened me more than that wonderful statement.

[Mrs. Alice Mahon]

We must stop allowing withdrawal in 1998 to dominate the agenda. Karl Bildt and others who are more knowledgeable than I have talked about building bridges, and they do not mean just in the physical sense. Conflict prevention is the dominant need, and we all accept that a return to war is not an option. The international community must adopt that as its main theme.

We must also address the war crimes issue. At the recent North Atlantic Assembly meeting, arguments were put from both sides. One side argued for South African-style reconciliation and the other talked about bringing the war criminals to justice. The hon. Member for Tatton said clearly that Bosnia could have peace or justice, but not both. That may be true, but that dilemma should concentrate our minds. The military know where the criminals are, but perhaps we need to rethink the mandates.

Freedom does not come free, and I pay tribute to our forces in Bosnia. Sixty people have been killed and 350 people wounded since IFOR and SFOR went in. Freedom comes at a cost, but we should not give up because the prize is too great.

11.42 am

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I had not intended to speak in the debate, but it is important to follow the remarks of my hon. Friends the Members for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) and for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) and the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) and emphasise that the current situation in Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia is fraught with great danger.

One of the problems of the past six or seven years has been that international media coverage, with the exception of the BBC's, has been dominated by soundbite politics. Soundbites have influenced public opinion by demanding instant solutions to complex problems. We have seen that in Africa and other parts of the world. When CNN cameras are not covering what is happening, many atrocities and human rights abuses are not reported.

The hon. Member for Tatton mentioned a possible choice between peace and justice. That is often the choice in international conflicts. We cannot always get everything we want and the world's problems today are more difficult and complex than they were three or four years ago, let alone 10 or 20 years ago. Solutions that some of us might have put forward four or five years ago are no longer applicable today. Similarly, it is sterile to argue about whether certain actions were right in 1992, 1995 or 1996. However, I share the criticisms of the premature recognition of Croatia, which was of seminal psychological importance in its effect on the Serbs and their feelings about what they perceived as the re-establishment of an Ustashe state and the consequent memories of 1941–44.

Anyone who has talked, as I have, to the Serbian community in this country, including those who fled in 1948, who were mostly monarchists, will know that they feel a deep resentment about the demonisation of their community, religion and culture by the actions undertaken by people with whom they do not agree politically. The Serbian community in this country feels emotionally attached to the Serbian church and its culture, and they feel labelled and blamed, unjustly, for what has been done by others in their former homeland. Many of the Serbs in this country came from Krajina. They feel a double injustice because they think that the international community has been less firm in dealing with the Croatian Government and what they did to the Serbian population of Krajina than it has been in addressing other aspects of the problem.

In the past few months, as a member of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee in the previous Parliament, I had discussions with all the main players when they visited London, including the three Opposition leaders from Serbia, who are now unfortunately squabbling among themselves. I have had discussions with people from Republika Srpska and the joint presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina and with leading Croat politicians. If one speaks to them all individually, one would believe that a reasonable solution were possible. However, we know from what has happened in former Yugoslavia that the hatreds and historical animosities run very deep. Every conversation has a different historical starting point. The date that people regard as important in their history is what determines their attitudes to today's conflict.

The problem that the international community faces—not only in Bosnia but in Cyprus and other countries with intractable problems—is that the American, CNN-driven, quick-fix solution of sending for the cavalry, going in, sorting it out, pulling out and leaving them to get on with it does not work for complex historic problems. I do not wish to attack Mr. Holbrooke for all his effort and the hours he put in, because he clearly played an important role, but his Dayton fix has not achieved a long-term solution. That will require the work that Karl Bildt has been calling for and the long-term commitment of military forces, internationally trained police forces and civilian reconstruction of the infrastructure.

I strongly criticised events of three or four years ago and said so in the House on several occasions. I thought that we were in danger of approaching the problem from only one side and of being bounced into simple solutions. Nevertheless, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill)—I am grateful for the opportunity to make the point today—that premature withdrawal of the international commitment would be absurd and dangerous. We must send that message loud and clear to the United States. If a country makes a commitment to assist in an international conflict or civil war, the commitment must be long term. It cannot be committed one year and pull out the next. What happens if a country pulls out? Weaponry and complicated equipment are left behind, which, in certain hands, can be major force multipliers in a conflict.

We know that, for the best of motives, the American Administration have tried to create a balance of military forces in Bosnia. There were two ways of accomplishing that. The first was to reduce the forces of all sides, and the second—the method chosen—was to pile in more equipment for one side of the conflict. The net consequence has been the introduction of more armaments into a potential battlefield.

There is a further complication. The international community should be much more vigilant about the efforts of some countries—particularly Iran—to play power politics in the region. It is understandable that Bosnia's Muslims feel that international support is necessary, but it would be extremely dangerous if the

international community were to turn a blind eye to the developments that have occurred over the past two to three years.

We must move cautiously if we are to keep our commitment to the stabilisation force and commit ourselves to long-term support for Bosnia, which may be necessary for as long 10 or 15 years. We have not resolved the situation in Cyprus, which has had a green line for many years. If we do not watch out and act cautiously, all sides in the Bosnian conflict may continue to rearm for a future conflict, in the expectation that international withdrawal will allow them—theoretically, because they will fail—to settle matters one way or the other.

All we have been given is a messy and possibly unworkable compromise, but we will have to live with it. Although it may take many years, we will have to try to change attitudes, rebuild institutions and create trust and dialogue. It is much easier to destroy such things than it is to build them. We must send that message to the United States and elsewhere. Today, I hope that all hon. Members will unite in doing so.

11.51 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) for proposing today's debate and to all hon. Members who have spoken for the very sober tone in which it has been conducted. We are dealing with an issue which runs to the very heart of the Government's commitment on how to conduct our own foreign policy. The issue runs to the heart also of the United Kingdom's moral responsibility in places such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and in the wider world.

My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham has given us a timely opportunity to discuss an issue which, over the past six years, has weighed heavily on the foreign policy agendas of Europe, the United States of America and the wider world. Today, voices have been raised in the House questioning whether those agendas have always had it right. Nevertheless, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) said, although an analysis of the past is important, we must think primarily of the future.

Today—18 months after the signing in Paris of the peace agreement negotiated in Dayton, Ohio—Bosnia-Herzegovina stands at a turning point. We must not delude ourselves about what has been achieved. The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) made the point that an absence of war does not mean that peace has been established. The progress of the past 18 months is important, but we must realise that it is not yet irreversible. On the contrary, the opportunity provided by the international presence in Bosnia is drifting past without progress in some of the most crucial spheres of peace implementation.

We must not underestimate the scale of the transformation in Bosnia. Four years of war caused untold human misery and left a wasteland of death and destruction. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) was absolutely right to say that searching for and designating one ethnic group or another as "the victim", and increasing support for that group, is a tragic mistake. The truth is that there were victims on every side of the conflict and it was a tragedy for every side.

Thanks to the peace agreement, the fighting has stopped and the rival armies have been separated and demobilised. Moreover—although perhaps not quickly enough—the mine fields are being cleared. The elections that have been held, although not perfect, are a crucial first step in the democratic process. Common institutions have been established, and reconstruction is under way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham mentioned the refugee problem. A quarter of a million refugees and displaced persons have returned to their homes. In comparison with the rate of repair after the second world war, for example, the transformation in Bosnia has been dramatic and rapid. My hon. Friend was right, however, to say that by no stretch of the imagination do we yet have the solution right.

The Dayton agreement recognises that Bosnia has essentially split in half, with the Serbs on one side of the confrontation line and the Bosnians and Croats on the other. We should emphasise, however, that the agreement envisages a process of gradual reintegration. The goal is a single Bosnian state, power sharing between the ethnic groups, freedom of movement, reversal of ethnic cleansing and a state in which the return of peace and prosperity will eventually eclipse the divisions of the war years.

The vision of a united and multi-ethnic Bosnia is one to which the Government are and must be firmly attached. We are attached to it not only because it would be morally wrong to reward the abominable ethnic cleansing conducted during the war but because—as my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax said—there is no place in today's Europe for the narrow-minded nationalism that would take Bosnia down the road to ethnic partition.

After 18 months, the divisions left by the war are still very much with us and can be illustrated by a few examples. My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham mentioned the issue of refugees returning. The peace agreement established the right of every refugee to return to his or her home, but that is quite simply not happening. The international community is rebuilding houses for returning refugees, but, before the homes can be occupied, they are burnt down by local thugs and gangsters while the local authorities and police stand idly by.

Every Bosnian citizen should have the right to travel freely around Bosnia, but police checkpoints are being used deliberately to obstruct and harass people exercising that right. It is still not possible to make direct telephone calls from Sarajevo in the Federation to Pale in the Republika Srpska, although they are only a few miles apart. The problem is not technical or caused by a lack of resources—the international community has offered any necessary help—but a political blockage within the Bosnian leadership.

Political control of the media in all areas of Bosnia is at a level that we once associated with the communist regimes of eastern Europe, and it has no place in modern Europe. I could give other examples, but the underlying message is already clear: the cause of peace and the interests of the Bosnian people are being sacrificed at the altar of a divisive political theology.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): Does the Minister agree that in view of the genocide—that is the

[Mr. Malcolm Wicks]

right word—in Bosnia, the British Government should use all their influence to ensure that the leading criminals are arrested and brought to justice as soon as possible?

Mr. Lloyd: In a word, yes—of course that is right. My hon. Friend raises an issue of fundamental importance. If he will allow me, however, I will deal with it later in my speech.

The Government are not prepared for the current situation of inertia and deliberate obfuscation and obstruction by the Bosnian authorities to drag on. That was the very clear message taken by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs three weeks ago to the meeting in Sintra, Portugal, of the Peace Implementation Council steering board—the body responsible for overseeing implementation of the Dayton peace agreement. The meeting's outcome was an unequivocal message to the Bosnian authorities to the effect that there was no alternative to the vision of Bosnia conceived at Dayton, that further attempts to prevent that vision from becoming a reality would simply not be tolerated and that the continued support—financial and otherwise—of the international community depended on their commitment to a peaceful and democratic future. The Sintra communiqué makes that message clear and I will present to the House one or two of its key passages.

First, it was stated at Sintra that there is no military option for any party or ethnic group in Bosnia in the future. The war is over—having brought death, destruction, and misery for millions—and no one will be allowed to restart it.

Secondly, there is no partition or secession option available. The idea of a new apartheid in Europe, of ethnically separate mini-states, is unworkable, immoral and cannot be accepted.

Thirdly, no single community in Bosnia can hope to dominate Bosnia's institutions. The peace agreement provides for power sharing on a basis of equality. That is the only possible future for Bosnia, and it is time that it was accepted by all the parties involved.

In essence, the steering board Foreign Ministers at Sintra signalled that their patience with Bosnia's leaders had run its course. Those individuals are prepared to put their own short-term political games and ethnic intolerance above the interests of their citizens, who are some of the poorest and most deprived people in Europe. That is unacceptable, and it will not be accepted.

In future, when any of Bosnia's leaders persist in blocking reintegration, or in pursuing options other than that set out in the peace agreement, the international community will find direct ways of achieving results. That could involve, for example, the suspension of any Bosnian media network or programme which promotes ethnic intolerance and refusing to deal with Bosnian ambassadors who represent just one of Bosnia's constituent peoples rather than the country as a whole. It could also involve the international community taking action to unify the telephone systems. It will certainly mean denying economic reconstruction assistance to those who consistently fail to meet their peace agreement obligations.

The Government are already putting the tough new stance into action. We have made it absolutely clear to the Bosnian Serbs that we are not prepared to tolerate their attempts to backtrack on commitments to economic legislation made at Sintra. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has sent extremely tough messages to both President Krajisnik and President Milosevic, emphasising the need for rapid agreement to the legislative package now under consideration by Bosnia's central institutions. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham, I can say that in the absence of agreement, all funds pledged for the Republika Srpska at the forthcoming World Bank and European Commission donor conference will be frozen.

The decisions taken by the steering board Foreign Ministers at Sintra gave new impetus to the process of peace implementation, and the momentum created must not be lost. It is up to the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to seize the chance that they have been given to rebuild their country on the basis of tolerance, democracy, respect for human rights and reconciliation, enabling it to move slowly but surely towards the European mainstream.

One aspect of non-implementation of the peace agreement, however, requires particular attention and condemnation—that of war crimes indictees. Thanks to the efforts of a courageous and committed group of journalists in Bosnia during the Bosnian war, we learned about the appalling crimes and atrocities of that conflict—events which seemed inconceivable and which my generation believed could never happen in Europe at the end of the 20th century.

The international tribunal was established to bring certain individuals to justice, but to date—this is a matter raised by a number of hon. Members—most of those indicted by the tribunal remain at large in Bosnia and in neighbouring countries, some of them in positions of considerable influence if not of formal, technical power. It is nowhere more true than in Bosnia that without justice there can be no lasting peace. While I understand the juxtaposition of peace and justice mentioned by the hon. Member for Tatton, we must insist that both be pressed for as rapidly as possible.

There can be no lasting peace without justice—an issue to which the British Government must attach the highest priority and one which I was glad to have the opportunity to discuss last week when I met Judge Antonio Cassese. We are, I believe, in the first rank of those helping the tribunal. We have given personnel, resources and evidence, including eye witness reports from British soldiers who served in Bosnia. A British judge, Judge May, has recently been elected to the panel of tribunal judges.

I must emphasise, however, that responsibility for capturing indictees and handing them over to the tribunal must rest with the Governments of the region. There can be no ambiguity or doubt about that, and their failure so far to do so is deplorable. We have increased the pressure on those Governments. As a result of decisions taken at Sintra, the international community will blacklist any municipality in which war crimes indictees hold public office and we shall work with our EU partners to implement a comprehensive travel ban on anyone having dealings with such persons. We shall also look for other ways of pressing those Governments to live up to their international obligations—for example, none will achieve their ambitions for closer relations with NATO or the European Union until they have done so.

Hon. Friends have mentioned the role of SFOR. While I repeat for the third time that it must be the responsibility of the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and their neighbours to deliver indictees to the tribunal, SFOR troops will detain and transfer to the tribunal any indicted person with whom they come into contact in the course of their duties—provided, of course, that the tactical situation permits.

Mr. Dalyell *rose—*

Mr. Lloyd: Perhaps my hon. Friend will allow me to continue as I may be about to answer his question.

The London conference in December last year asked the steering board to consider what more could be done to bring indictees to justice. We are following up that remit vigorously, in consultation with our allies. For obvious reasons, it would not be acceptable for me to comment further and no one here would expect me to do so. However, I must tell my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow that any action to get war criminals to The Hague must, of course, ensure the safety of SFOR troops and other members of the international community.

Mr. Dalyell: I do not expect my hon. Friend to reply off the top of his head as this is basically a defence matter, but on the subject of SFOR troops and their safety some of us feel very strongly that the heavy armour must be retained in Bosnia. We must remember the experience of the Sappers, some of whom were taken hostage. To make the point, especially to the Serbs, the heavy tanks—the Challengers—have to be there.

Mr. Lloyd: My hon. Friend will forgive me as I am simply not qualified to give him a direct response, but I can say that the security of our own troops is very high on any list of priorities that we would draw up. All hon. Members who have spoken have paid tribute to the role of the British troops serving in Bosnia, and I agree with that sentiment. As part of our recognition of that, we have an obligation to ensure that the safety of the troops figures highly on our list of priorities.

On the question of human rights more generally, a decision was taken at last December's London conference to make a sizeable increase in the number of the international police task force expressly so as to allow that force a greater role in investigating human rights abuses. That was a welcome step and has now been confirmed by a United Nations Security Council resolution.

Several hon. Members raised the subject of a possible successor to the stabilisation force currently deployed on the ground in Bosnia. It is too early to say what requirement there will be for a follow-on military presence after SFOR withdraws in June 1998—the key priority now is to focus on achieving as much as we can in the next 12 months—but we have made it clear that we believe that any follow-on force should be NATO led and should involve a sizeable US presence on the ground.

Lastly, we must not lose sight of the regional dimension. The problems of Bosnia are not the only ones in the region: difficulties remain, for example, over the reintegration of eastern Slavonia, the need for progress in Kosovo and the regional refugee crisis. By their very nature, the problems of the region are interrelated and we need a comprehensive regional strategy to address them.

I should like to make a topical point. A particular matter of concern throughout the region is the question of free media. The elections in Croatia have highlighted continuing problems with state domination of the media there. Last week in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia we welcomed the launch, with UK and international support, of an independent radio network covering much of the country. Attempts by the FRY authorities to suppress independent political reporting must cease. For all the countries in the region, progress in that respect will be a key factor in deciding how their relations with the European Union develop.

Mr. Hill: The media will obviously play a part in the municipal elections in September, which my hon. Friend the Minister has not yet mentioned. Is he satisfied that the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe has the resources and experience and is the appropriate body properly to oversee those elections? Will he give an assurance that the British Government and the other Governments involved will apply the closest possible scrutiny to the activities of the OSCE in the period leading up to the municipal elections?

Mr. Lloyd: I apologise to my hon. Friend: he raised that matter earlier and although I intended to reply directly, I have not done so.

I sympathise with my hon. Friend's critique of last September's elections. We accept that there were shortcomings, but it was inevitable that there would be difficulties in holding elections less than a year after a ceasefire in a country with relatively limited democratic traditions. The outcome was far from perfect and we have to ensure that the lessons learnt then are put into practice so that future elections in Bosnia conform far more closely to acceptable international standards.

We believe that the OSCE is indeed the proper body to monitor the forthcoming municipal elections, which are scheduled to take place on 13 and 14 September this year. Voter registration is under way and it is important to note that refugees—including those in the United Kingdom—can register to vote, either where they were registered in 1991 or in the municipality in which they intend to live in the future. The UK has so far provided 48 core supervisors, trainers and registration supervisors, two long-term observers and 14 secondees to the OSCE mission in Bosnia. We have also contributed £2 million to the OSCE's budget and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is currently considering what further support we can give.

Those who are monitoring events on the ground in Bosnia are confident that the lessons of the previous elections have been learnt by the OSCE mission and that the forthcoming municipal elections will be more free and fair as a result. However, it is right to say that all of us owe an obligation to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina to ensure that the OSCE is charged with the importance of monitoring the elections in an acceptable manner and we will play our role in that. The municipal elections must be carried off in an acceptable way as part of the process of civilianisation. I cannot overemphasise the importance of the electoral process and of ensuring that the elections pass without difficulty and are deemed to be as free and fair as possible.

The problems of Bosnia have to be set in the regional context. The European Union has made a good start with the elaboration of a regional approach to the development

[Mr. Lloyd]

of relations with the countries of the region, making progress for the individual countries dependent on both their support for peace implementation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and their own internal policies. We must insist on that and build on it.

In the longer term, regional stability will be best served by drawing the countries of former Yugoslavia into Europe's political, economic and security architecture, rather than by keeping them outside it and trying to distance ourselves from the vagaries of that volatile region. The Balkans are European and we must ensure that they are integrated into the processes of Europe. Only through integration, both within the region and between the region and the rest of Europe, can the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the surrounding countries put the past behind them and begin to plan for a peaceful and prosperous future. If we want to build a just and lasting peace in the Balkans—as we do—that regional process is the only way to achieve it.

12.14 pm

Sitting suspended.

European Union Enlargement

12.30 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): My purpose in calling this debate was simple. Having been unable to speak in the European debate last Monday week, I decided to try to hold one of my own. I was lucky in the ballot; and as it turns out, this is a particularly pertinent day for the debate. Yet again, this time in Amsterdam, the leaders of the EU have dragged their feet on enlargement, on which I shall say more in a moment.

This is my maiden speech and I should like to say something about my predecessor. Tony Nelson made an enormous contribution to this House. Talking to hon. Members, I have come to realise how popular he was with his colleagues. He also made notable contributions as a Treasury and then as a trade Minister. But it was while campaigning that I realised the full extent of his contribution to politics, because I met so many people on their doorsteps whom, in his quiet but effective way, Tony had helped over the years. I am fortunate to be taking over from him.

I am fortunate, too, to be able to represent Chichester. The city itself has enormous charm, not least because the restrictions on the height of new constructions have preserved the mediaeval views of the cathedral from most directions. The destructive planning zeal of the 1960s was kept at bay in Chichester.

In terms of population, the city is only a little over a quarter of the constituency, which is primarily a rural seat stretching more than 30 miles, all the way from Linchmere and North Chapel on the Surrey border to Selsey and the Witterings on the south coast. The constituency contains elegant country towns such as Petworth and Midhurst, and incorporates a great swathe of the south downs, sprinkled with some of the most delightful villages in the whole of England.

Certainly, Chichester could scarcely have been more beautiful than it was as the first pink fingers of dawn came up behind the cathedral on 2 May, soon after the declaration. I was also reminded that one is never far from the countryside when, driving the three miles home to Bosham from the count, I disturbed deer on the road.

The need intelligently to restrain the pressure for development and more housing, and the need to conserve the beauty of the area, will no doubt be high on my agenda in the years ahead—as will the concerns of the horticultural and farming communities.

I am also fortunate to have contested Chichester, in the obvious sense that I was standing on a piece of blue ground high enough to avoid the red tide of 1 May—high enough, indeed, to send me here with a majority of nearly 10,000. But I would rather have half the majority and twice the number of colleagues.

The Conservatives were defeated not because they espoused the wrong policies. On the contrary, it was only when Labour adopted both Conservative rhetoric and Conservative policies, lock, stock and barrel—even going as far as to accept the ceilings on public expenditure, programme by programme—that it became electable. The Conservatives were defeated because they appeared divided, above all on Europe.

It is a curious fact, and a tragedy for the Conservative party, that so many of the points made on both sides of the so-called Europe divide are right. I believe that there

is much to commend the commonsense approach to many of these issues of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). But there is also no doubt that a huge number of the criticisms of the EU voiced by so-called Euro-sceptics are also correct. The EU's budget is often wastefully, sometimes corruptly, spent, as successive Court of Auditors reports have revealed. Absurd and ill-thought-out regulations pour out of Brussels. EU Commissioners would do well to heed the strictures of that great free trader, Richard Cobden—incidentally, he went to Midhurst grammar school in my constituency—who said:

"With how little knowledge we enter upon the task of regulating the concerns of other people."

As for economic and monetary union, whatever its economic merits—and there are some—the challenge of preparing for it is now bringing about a dangerous competitive deflation between France and Germany.

In the months ahead, the Government may seek to create the impression of a new and more positive policy towards Europe, but I believe that the policy, whatever the tone, will remain much the same. At Amsterdam another opt-out has been negotiated, this time on immigration and asylum—although it is dressed up differently.

There has of course been one change—signing the social chapter. I believe that that is a profound mistake, but I shall develop my reasons for thinking so on another occasion.

The social chapter excepted, I believe that the Government will be forced back to broadly the same policies as the former Government pursued on Europe. That is simply because all the logic points to them. And, despite a good deal of watering down by the Foreign Office, those policies amount to a demand for fundamental reform of the European Union. Above all, the British agenda has been, and should continue to be, to abandon the drive for federalism and replace it with a framework of close co-operation between independent states: a framework loose enough to accommodate the needs of the newly liberated states of eastern Europe.

The European Union desperately needs fundamental reform. It was created to do one job in the post-war period, and it should now be doing another for the 21st century. There were three original tasks: to create an institutional framework for Franco-German reconciliation after the horrors of the last war; to provide an economic framework of co-operation that could prevent a repetition of the economic crises of the 1930s—crises which did so much to bring about the rise of Hitler and Nazism; and thirdly, the European Economic Community, as it then was, was created to act as a bulwark against the spread of communism. It was an economic counterpart to NATO. It is worth recalling that until the withdrawal of Soviet troops from east Germany in the early 1990s, they were as close to my constituency as Aberdeen.

Today, none of these objectives is relevant to Europe's peace and prosperity. Few people believe that the French and Germans are going to start another war, or that we will be plunged into another bout of 1930s-style protection. As for the communist threat, the Soviet Union has collapsed into 16 more or less independent countries.

In my view, the great issues facing the continent of Europe in the 21st century will have little to do with those that led to the creation of the European Community. In a nutshell, there are two of them. First, there is the imperative need to restore Europe's global competitiveness. Britain may be doing better than most, but the whole continent is slipping behind the far east, in particular.

Secondly, the countries of the EU should be finding a way quickly to re-integrate central and eastern Europe in the family of western democracies. That can be achieved only by building institutions that fall short of the federal goal. Only the most lunatic Euro-federalists believe that there could be a federation from Britain to Belarus.

There is plainly an unsustainable tension between widening and deepening. The countries of central and eastern Europe have an understandable desire, for the first time in over half a century, to express their national identity, and the German objective of subsuming Germany's national identity in a wider European framework holds no appeal for them. Their applications for membership are motivated by something quite different: by the need to bolster their new-found independence, by the need for recognition as part of the family of western nations which membership of western institutions brings, and by the fear of exclusion from a zone of economic prosperity.

I believe that it is in both Britain's and western Europe's interests that wider should come before deeper. We all have a huge geopolitical stake in consolidating the stability of eastern Europe.

I speak as a convinced European but one who believes that, of all the post-war institutions, the EU is the one which has shown the least imagination in adapting to the revolutions that have swept across our continent in the past eight years. One of the saddest spectacles of all was the sight of leaders of the EU carrying on with exactly the same agenda for reform of the EC after the Berlin wall came down as the one they had been pursuing before. That is rigidity and myopia on a grand scale. How can it be that at Maastricht and still at Amsterdam the leaders of western Europe are ignoring the dramatic events taking place around them, and instead are carrying on with further bids to complete the outworn agenda drawn up in the 1950s?

The plain fact is that the challenge of completing the 1950s agenda is an act of faith for several of western Europe's leaders, particularly those whose views were moulded by the searing experiences of the last war.

Of course, there are also many practical reasons why the countries of the European Union find enlargement indigestible, among them the fear of increased competition, worries about labour mobility and concern about the cost of enlargement. It is not lost on some countries that they would be turned from net recipients into net contributors.

Real though those concerns are, none of them should be insuperable. Most of the countries of central and eastern Europe have a strong commitment to free markets and a capacity to implement internal market laws at least equal to those of the newer entrants from the southern tier.

As for the budgetary costs, those worries are also an opportunity; many of them are generated by the common agricultural policy and regional policy, both of which desperately need root and branch reform. The European budget is one of the scandals of our time.

The old agenda is also sustained by the varied but very practical objectives of some of the key players in the EC. I saw that at first hand, in my own small way.

[Mr. Andrew Tyrie]

In 1990 and 1991, shortly after I left my job as adviser in the Treasury, I was sent out to try to sell the so-called "hard ECU proposal".

I well remember a lunch—a very good lunch—in the guest restaurant in the top of the Tresor. When the wine was flowing, the French official said to me, "Look, Andrew, we need EMU because that is the only way we can control the Germans. We must get our hands on the Bundesbank, and Britain must help us." French policy, moulded by three invasions in the past 120 years, is dedicated above all to the need to control Germany.

A few weeks later, I was in Rome, having another excellent lunch—there are some compensations for being a salesman for the hard ECU proposal—and I asked my host, a former senior adviser to the Italian Government, why Italy was pursuing EMU so vigorously, when it would obviously be so difficult for the Italian economy to adjust. He replied to the following effect: "You must understand, Andrew, that government in Rome is little short of a disaster. Even government from Brussels is better than this."

And the small countries have their own motives. How else could Luxembourg, with a population about the same size as that of my birthplace, Southend on Sea, obtain a vote in the Council of Ministers and even a veto on many issues?

In contrast, for most British people there never has been a big political subtext for membership; nor, like Germany, have we needed it as a badge of international respectability. It has always been seen by most in Britain simply as a vehicle for greater economic prosperity.

I began by saying that the Europe issue had a lot to do with my party's defeat at the last election. The future of the European Union, however, is not just a problem for my party or even for Britain; it is Europe's problem. I believe that the countries of Europe should discard the outworn agenda drawn up in the 1950s with an eye on the last war, which is still directing policy.

The EU should start to address the new agenda that I have outlined briefly, and it should do so quickly, instead of offering subtle protection as a reaction to the loss of competitiveness and stalling measures to delay membership to the central European countries. I saw both of those first hand when I was working for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. I fear that more stalling tactics on enlargement were in evidence at Amsterdam.

If the EU does not reform itself, it will at best make itself less and less relevant to the problems of its citizens, and at worst, the pursuit of federal conformity will threaten the social stability which the founding fathers of the EU hoped that it would underpin.

I fervently hope that this Government, like the previous one, will not shirk the task of pressing the EU to change direction and accelerate enlargement; nor should they allow official advice to conjure evil spirits from the notion of a multidimensional Europe.

It is time to discard the idea that members of the EU should move forward together on everything, or not at all. That has long been a myth, anyway. Britain's interests lie simply in being in that ring, tier or dimension—call it what one wants—which is consonant with the greatest degree of market freedom and economic prosperity.

I have given some of the reasons why the Government may face an uphill struggle in putting the case for swifter enlargement. Even if the leaders of some other countries are not prepared to address that agenda, I hope that the Government will not be afraid to use all the tools at their disposal to press their case.

Britain's huge financial contributions to the EU are a powerful lever in negotiations. Withholding those contributions may eventually have to be considered. If such a policy were to succeed in triggering reform of the EU and swifter enlargement, then 20 years of large net contributions to the Community would at last be seen to pay a dividend.

12.44 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) on his speech—an excellent speech, from its remarkably honest opening to its perceptive conclusions, as we might expect from an adviser to successive Chancellors of the Exchequer, and from a graduate of the College of Europe which, I remind the House, is of course based in Bruges.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Doug Henderson): Where is that?

Mr. Davis: The Minister for Europe asks an appropriate question.

My hon. Friend's warnings on Europe were well informed, and eloquently and clearly expressed. They are particularly timely today, in the aftermath of Amsterdam. I commend my hon. Friend for a brilliant speech at the start, I think, of an outstanding career.

12.45 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Doug Henderson): I begin by congratulating you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your appointment. I have not yet had the opportunity to do so from the Dispatch Box. I have always known that you were a measured man in your previous roles in Parliament, and I am sure that you will continue to be a measured man in your current role, and that we will all be the better for that.

I join the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) in congratulating the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) on his first contribution to the House. He said that he had hoped to speak in the Europe debate. If some of us were disappointed that we did not have the opportunity to hear him then, we were compensated today. His speech was generous to his predecessor and a thoughtful contribution on Europe. It was interesting and its content was excellent, although it contained some mild ambiguity. I may return to that, if the clock permits.

The hon. Gentleman said that he was pleased to represent a rural constituency. I am sure that he is particularly pleased that three quarters of his constituency is rural. I know how beautiful the constituency is.

I had the pleasure of responding to a maiden contribution from the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) and I recalled that I had spent a little time in my late teens working in that area. I worked for British Rail for a while, and one of my jobs, to earn a little

overtime, was as a train announcer at Redhill station. On occasions, I had the good fortune to read out the stations between Redhill and Bognor Regis and, if my memory serves me correctly, the train stopped at Petworth, Midhurst and other stations.

I know the hon. Gentleman's constituency a little, and of course it is famous also for its cricket ground, a fact that will be appreciated by Mr. Deputy Speaker, who takes a keen interest in such matters.

The hon. Gentleman accused our European colleagues of myopia. He is well placed to understand the way in which Europe works. The hon. Gentleman is also well placed to understand the workings of the Conservative party. I understand why he made certain comments on the day between votes on the Conservative party leadership.

I am bound to correct the hon. Gentleman on one point. If he is present in the Chamber later today, he will hear the statement by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. My right hon. Friend will confirm that there is no border controls opt-out by Britain in the agreement reached at Amsterdam. The treaty asserts Britain's right to control its borders—an outcome which the Conservatives failed to achieve during 18 years in government.

The hon. Member for Chichester described himself as a European. We are all Europeans because we live in Europe. The hon. Gentleman pointed to some compensation for the European way of life that had more to do with the stomach than anything else—I am sure that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden agrees with him. During my six weeks in Europe, I found it a bit of a bind at lunchtime—although I did not complain in the evenings. I have much in common with my European colleagues, but I do not like long lunches and I understand the hon. Gentleman's feelings in that regard.

The hon. Gentleman showed considerable wisdom in raising several general points—I hope that time will allow me to respond specifically to the enlargement question. He will learn from my right hon. Friend's statement this afternoon that negotiations in Amsterdam identified the same crucial priorities. The hon. Gentleman emphasised the need to combat fraud. It is no longer acceptable for public organisations anywhere in Europe to permit incidents of fraud or alleged fraud and to accept them as a way of life. It is incumbent on organisations to take every step necessary to combat fraud. My right hon. Friend's statement will refer to that issue and to how Britain has taken a lead in negotiations in the past six weeks by insisting on the inclusion of a clause about combating fraud. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support on that important issue.

The hon. Gentleman was correct to state that Europe's future relies on the close co-operation of nations and that federalism is not on the major players' European agenda at present. My right hon. Friend will also identify that priority in his statement. We agree about the nature of the global environment: global competitiveness is vital to the British economy and to other economies throughout Europe.

The European Union must also address the important question of employability. Any organisation may draw up regulations to deal with individual matters—and some regulations are necessary in order to underpin basic rights—but the key issue in economic and employment terms, on which my right hon. Friend will reflect this afternoon, is making British people more employable. Politicians are not alone in recognising that fact. People employed in factories up and down the country know that their futures depend on their gaining new skills and on their companies' having good products, being competitive, adapting to new technology and breaking into new markets.

Those factors must form the core of the European Union's employment strategy. The EU must not meddle in every employment issue affecting member states, but must set out a framework in areas where it is wise to co-operate and to exchange best practice. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman identified that vital part of the EU's employment strategy. I hope that later today his colleagues will show their understanding of the nation's needs—which I hope that the Government have recognised.

We believe that enlargement is crucial to the European Community's future. The countries of western, central and eastern Europe have witnessed many changes in recent years. The European Union has also seen many changes in the 30 years since its inception. Europe must combine its existing challenges with those that it will face in the longer term, particularly in view of the changing position in a wider Europe. Stability, security and substantial trading opportunities are crucial to Europe as a whole.

We must stage a concerted attack against crime, illegal drugs and global pollution. One country cannot solve those problems alone, and neither can the present European Union. It is in member states' interests to extend the European Union's sphere of influence to include other countries that may wish to join the Union in the near future. The hon. Gentleman may be aware of the timetable in that regard: the Commission will consider the applications of 10 would-be member countries by mid-July and express its view regarding their suitability.

As the hon. Gentleman said, countries have different priorities and motivations for joining the EU. However, they will be assessed using common criteria. Parliamentary democracy must be established in any nation that wishes to join the European Union. Human rights and the protection of minorities—a hallmark of any democracy—must be guaranteed before a nation will be permitted to join the European Union. Countries aspiring to EU membership must have established market economies that are sufficiently robust to allow them a good chance of withstanding the pressures that they will inevitably face as they come into line with existing EU member economies.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Does the Amsterdam summit's failure to make any progress on institutional reform as a preparation for enlargement mean that those who wish to put roadblocks in the way of enlargement have won the day?

Mr. Henderson: My hon. Friend takes a keen interest in these matters. As I have told the hon. Gentleman, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will make a statement to the House this afternoon. While we would have liked to see more progress in establishing the European Union's new institutional framework, some progress has been made. My right hon. Friend will refer to changes that will be made before enlargement occurs. Unfortunately, we could not secure detailed agreement among the nations of

[Mr. Henderson]

the European Union about alterations to the voting system and the Commission's structure. However, a large measure of understanding was reached. I have had extensive talks with European colleagues in the past three days, and I assure my hon. Friend that they agree that the enlargement issue must be addressed. It is a case of making as many changes as we can now in order to establish a structure that will enable further changes in the future.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) *rose—*

Mr. Henderson: I am sorry, I cannot give way as I must complete my response to the hon. Member for Chichester. However, I shall remember the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome and give way to him generously on another occasion.

All applications for EU membership will be considered, and detailed negotiations will take place with those countries that the Commission believes are ready to enter into them. We must also keep in close touch with other nations that hope to meet the membership criteria at a later stage. EU members should assist them in preparing to make the changes necessary in order to meet those criteria.

There are many implications for the future of the existing nations of the European Union and those who wish to join it. In the time ahead, I hope that those who are truly committed to the future of democracy and to a successful, prosperous Europe of political understanding will work together to meet the challenges. I hope that they will do so regardless of the minor differences that may exist among people about local party political issues. I hope that those people will use their endeavours to meet the challenges to ensure that the enlargement of the European Union takes place. We will then achieve the success and stability that is crucial to our future.

Asbestos Imports

1 pm

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): First, I should like to offer my congratulations to the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle). I know that it is a little belated, but this is the first time I have been able to address her in the Chamber. I know that she has a good understanding of environmental issues, good sense and tenacity. I know that she will do a first-class job.

I intend to make the case for banning asbestos. I will put the evidence on behalf of that and then suggest to my hon. Friend a course of action. I believe that the case for banning white asbestos is irresistible. Today, 11 people will die either because they worked with asbestos or because they had contact with it unwittingly. Of those 11, four will die of mesothelioma, four from cancer of the lung and the others from asbestosis or other asbestos-related diseases.

I have not just plucked those figures from the air—they are based on research that was supported by the Health and Safety Executive and published in 1985. It showed that in the next 25 years the number of deaths would increase to reach a predicted death rate of between 5,000 and 10,000. That is a matter of great concern, and when the chairman of the Health and Safety Commission commented on his advice to the previous Government in January, he said:

"Asbestos is one of the biggest occupational health challenges facing us today."

I should like to mention some cases with which I am familiar in which white asbestos has been a factor. In my former job I represented miners who had been injured at work and I still do some medical appeal tribunal work.

In 1980, I dealt with the case of a man who developed asbestosis, having spent all his life working in a colliery as a lamp room attendant. The only link that we could find to relate the disease to his occupation was the fact that as he dismantled and reassembled the oil lamps, he had fitted a small white ring of asbestos above and below the glass in those lamps. Until recently, those lamps were used to detect methane gas. It was that contact with asbestos which caused the man to develop asbestosis in later life.

I am currently dealing with the case of a constituent, Mr. Ted Dudley, who is an elderly miner. In the 1950s, he worked with machines that had asbestos linings. Two years ago, his lungs were found to be full of asbestos material and part of his lung was removed. I emphasise to the Minister that that condition became apparent 40 years after the man's contact with asbestos.

In answer to a written question that appears in the *Hansard* of yesterday's date, at column *39*, I was informed that in 1995–96 there was one award in each year to teaching professionals who contacted an asbestos-related disease. That does not include figures for posthumous claims. I should point out to my hon. Friend that those who have been in contact with asbestos unwittingly are often unaware of their condition and that the disease is generally discovered on death. The same answer reveals that the total number of awards for asbestosis in those two years came to 2,644.

Asbestos is one of the most dangerous substances in widespread use. It is, therefore, of great concern that it is still used despite the availability of effective substitutes. It is true that, in general, those substitutes tend to be a little more pricey, but that is because of the market. I suggest to my hon. Friend that if white asbestos were to be banned, the market for substitutes would expand and their price would fall. If there were such a ban, I am sure that the 1,000 people who are currently employed in the manufacture of materials that include asbestos would be absorbed by the expansion of the industry producing non-asbestos alternatives. If we consider the socio-economic costs of asbestosis to society—the cost of compensation, medical treatment and care—those substitutes become considerably cheaper than asbestos.

In September 1996, the World Health Organisation expressed concern about white asbestos and recommended that

"when available, substitute materials should be used."

I am informed by the Association for Manufacturers Against Asbestos that there are alternatives that could be used for the manufacture of most materials that currently rely on asbestos.

Huge amounts of asbestos are imported by Britain from Ireland and Belgium, and an increasing amount is also imported from Poland. In 1995, the value of imported white asbestos materials was £45 million. The major exporter and the largest manufacturer of asbestos materials is ETEX of Belgium, which owns Eternit Belgium, Eternit United Kingdom, Eternit France and Tegral of Ireland. My hon. Friend may find it interesting to know that Mr. Liam Hughes, the chair of the Asbestos Information Centre, is also chief executive of Eternit United Kingdom. That is hardly a recommendation for impartiality, but his evidence is drawn on by the Health and Safety Commission.

Increasing amounts of asbestos sheet is being imported from Poland. The raw material is taken there from Russia to complete its manufacturing process. The increase in those imports is quite alarming. According to Extrastat, which provides the relevant statistics on the industry, between April 1996 and April 1997 imports from Poland increased alarmingly. My hon. Friend should note that those statistics are somewhat bizarre for 1997. Those for 1996 record that in April, 38,180 kg of asbestos were imported by Britain at a value of £9,366. In the year-to-date column of the 1996 statistics we see the same figures. That shows that April is the beginning of the financial year. When a comparison is made with the 1997 statistics, we see that the value of asbestos imported in April 1997 is recorded as being £121,990. The value shown for the year to date—as I have said, the financial year begins in April—is £304,146. It is clear that there is an enormous difference between the two figures. Indeed, a reference states, "Suppressed commodity code."

The figures relate to money value, but weights are not mentioned. I am sure that the Minister is well aware that, because of the value of the pound, the amount of asbestos material that will be imported for the value that I have described will be considerable.

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): My hon. Friend is aware that I am at present the Rapporteur at the Council of Europe for a report on asbestos. My colleagues and I will follow with great interest the points that he is making. We have found that there is an enormous movement of asbestos within the 40 member states of the Council. We are deeply concerned about the inadequate labelling of the materials that are being moved. That is causing enormous problems. I hope that my hon. Friend and the Minister will take that on board.

Mr. Clapham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. The materials coming in from Poland are poorly labelled. Many construction companies are using roofing slates and other materials imported from Poland, unaware that they contain asbestos. It is alarming that many of those slates will be used in repairing public buildings such as schools.

I am aware, of course, that asbestos materials are already in public buildings and I acknowledge that it is not always appropriate to remove them. It is necessary, however, wherever there are asbestos materials, to ensure that those materials are contained and that work is maintained at the highest possible standard in containing it. Where asbestos material is removed, the work must be done safely in accordance with the HSE guidelines. My hon. Friend the Minister will be aware that we must regulate some of the cowboy demolition companies.

What should be done in the light of the evidence that I have put before my hon. Friend? Given the overwhelming evidence that white asbestos is dangerous, we must act now. I ask her to consider a complete and immediate ban in the United Kingdom on all white asbestos materials. She will know that France has already imposed such a ban, along with six other European countries. The French ban came into being on 1 January 1997.

Eternit France, to which I have already referred, argued that it would be put out of business. It said that the French ban would be catastrophic for the industry. I note from its January newsletter, however, that it was able to announce the conversion to new technology of its entire production base. It has not taken that company long to adjust to the ban in France. That company, which argues the merits of asbestos through the Asbestos Information Centre, knows full well that its production base is being changed to meet the ban. That says much for the Asbestos Information Centre.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to consider the possibility of moving on from a United Kingdom to a European-wide ban. I ask her also to consider a thorough review of asbestos licensing operations. That is important, because we find that many companies that work in the demolition sector tend to be those which do not care a great deal for their employees. Finally, I ask my hon. Friend whether she would be prepared to consider what might be done to require building owners to survey their buildings to locate asbestos.

1.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Angela Eagle): First, I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) on his success in securing an Adjournment debate on such an extremely important subject.

I assure the House at the outset that, unlike our predecessors, this Labour Government are determined to deal effectively with the new uses of asbestos once and for all. We have already initiated action. There will be no

[Angela Eagle]

empty promises from the Government and no palliatives such as those that came from the previous Administration. We value human life and we know that asbestos represents a serious threat to it. We shall take the necessary steps to protect human health.

I hope that my hon. Friend will indulge me a little: this is the first debate that enables me to confirm the Government's strong commitment to health and safety. I shall say a few words about that before coming to his justifiable worries.

We intend to put an end to what we believe has been a progressive erosion of governmental commitment to protecting people's health and safety over the past 18 years. The previous Administration did not, in our opinion, give health and safety the attention that it deserves. Main responsibility was concentrated exclusively at Under-Secretary of State level. We, however, have allocated two Ministers to this important area, the Minister for the Environment, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, West and Royton (Mr. Meacher), and myself.

We are unequivocal in our support for the important work that is done by the Health and Safety Executive and the commission. We have met their representatives and we have been impressed by their professionalism, expertise and commitment, and especially by the consensual, tripartite way in which they work. I wish to commend also the work of the Trades Union Congress and many individual trades unions in this extremely important area. They have great expertise and provide a mechanism with which to try to educate workers about the dangers of asbestos. That work is priceless.

We intend to be positive and proactive when it comes to health and safety.

My hon. Friend mentioned that the death toll from asbestos-related diseases is horrendous. About 1,200 people were killed by mesothelioma last year and about twice that number died from lung cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. Even worse, as my hon. Friend said, the death toll is predicted to continue to rise over the next two to three decades.

We know that most of those now suffering from asbestos-related disease are suffering as a result of exposure that occurred many years ago. I am determined that strong and effective measures are taken to minimise the risks posed by this killer substance. I am determined also that the death toll from asbestos in the long term should be reduced. Failure to recognise and accept the dangers from asbestos over previous decades, and failure to take all possible action when necessary, leaves us with a legacy of exposure to asbestos that will continue to claim lives for decades to come. We must safeguard the health of current and future generations by taking firm action now.

Large quantities of asbestos have been used in the construction of thousands of buildings—for example, schools, hospitals and office blocks—and work involving asbestos still represents an enormous health risk. That is one problem. Another is the justified concern about the continuing import of asbestos.

I was alarmed by some of the information that my hon. Friend gave the House, both about the bad labelling and about a seeming increase in imports, as well as about some of the rather dubious connections between the organisations that purport to give information and the industry itself. I shall draw those to the attention of the Health and Safety Commission.

The commission has given priority to the asbestos problem in recent years and we all know that the import and supply of blue and brown asbestos—the most hazardous types—have been banned for several years. However, as my hon. Friend pointed out, large quantities of both those types of asbestos remain in buildings, forming a potentially lethal legacy.

I am especially worried about the fact that, as my hon. Friend said, two teachers have now been discovered to be suffering from asbestosis. That demonstrates the danger that lurks in public buildings, and the legacy of the use of such substances. We must do what we can to minimise that danger.

Obviously, there is a considerable risk to those whose work disturbs asbestos during maintenance or other building work, or when the asbestos is removed. Those are the danger times. The commission has run an extensive publicity campaign to raise awareness among building workers, who are the people most at risk—although I recognise the extension of the risk that my hon. Friend described.

The casual nature of the building trade and the culture of sub-subcontracting undoubtedly puts building workers at risk. My hon. Friend talked about "cowboy" employers, and I do not dissent from that opinion. We must consider stronger action than mere publicity.

The Health and Safety Executive will take enforcement action, where that is merited, for breaches of asbestos regulations. Last year, the courts imposed a landmark custodial sentence for breaches of health and safety legislation. I welcome that—but there is bad news, too.

Only recently, fines totalling £3,800 plus costs were imposed by north Surrey magistrates for asbestos-related offences committed by Surrey county council and W. S. Atkins Ltd. on council premises. The Surrey case is worrying because it involved what was thought to be a blue chip company, from which one might have expected higher standards. If blue chip companies are being hauled before the courts for failing to observe existing statutory requirements, I dread to think what the cowboy companies are doing.

We should not be tempted to think that those involved in the Surrey case received a bloody nose. I do not regard £3,800 as much of a bloody nose. Even worse is the fact that the average fine secured by the HSE over the past five years for breaches of the law controlling asbestos at work was a mere £1,120. That is a pretty feeble sum by anyone's standards, given the fact that exposure to asbestos can cause appalling suffering, and even death.

I am determined that breaches of legislation designed to safeguard people's health against the effects of exposure to asbestos should be treated more seriously. Indeed, that should apply to all health and safety offences, to provide an effective deterrent for those who might otherwise contemplate flouting the law. In short, if the penalties are worse, companies will realise that they simply cannot get away with being lax and treating people's health and safety as some kind of afterthought.

In most cases, the fines currently handed down by the courts are pitifully low, which prevents the operation of an effective system of deterrence. We are considering

what can be done about that. I welcome the fact that the Health and Safety Commission is already considering a variety of other actions connected with tightening our legislation to protect workers from the effects of working with existing asbestos.

The commission is considering extending the scope of the current statutory licensing scheme covering asbestos stripping to include work with asbestos insulation board, and placing a new duty on owners or occupiers to survey buildings for the presence of asbestos. It is also considering extending the circumstances in which a licence to remove asbestos can be revoked, and how to exert stronger pressure in Europe to extend the existing prohibitions.

I take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox), who brought to my attention the worrying level of imports and the movement of badly labelled hazardous materials throughout Europe.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on the effective way in which she is putting the case and telling us that the Government will take more action on this important subject. She mentioned Europe, and my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone, in his excellent introduction, pointed out that France has an import ban. Many other countries also have tighter restrictions on the import of that deadly material.

Surely a Labour Government, keen on the health and safety of workers—my hon. Friend is certainly showing that she shares that attitude—would not want to do less than a country such as France. While we are talking about tightening the rules in Europe, will my hon. Friend ensure that if we achieve tighter restrictions on asbestos here, the banned substances will not be dumped in the third world?

Angela Eagle: I thank my hon. Friend for his sage intervention. He should have a little faith; I hope that he will like what he hears when I reach the end of my speech. However, I have only five minutes left and a lot more to say.

My Department has commissioned an independent assessment of the risks to health from environmental exposure to asbestos, including exposure in homes, schools and public places. I hope that the House will recognise that we are beginning to consider what we can do to give help, advice and some duties to local authorities and to the owners or managers of buildings in which asbestos is present.

Much of what the Health and Safety Commission is doing is good, but I believe that it can do more. I have, therefore, asked it for advice on how more urgent action can be taken, and for that advice to reach me quickly. For example, I believe that a duty to survey buildings for the presence of asbestos is vital, as it addresses an area of high risk and will enable priority to be given to identifying and properly treating the asbestos that remains. It is also important that such a duty will allow the presence of asbestos to be labelled, so that people know where the hazard lurks.

The quantities are being reduced, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone said, we cannot ignore the fact that chrysotile, or "white", asbestos is still being imported into this country. I am interested in my hon. Friend's information about increases in imports, and I should like to talk to him about it.

Most such asbestos is used in asbestos-cement products, and both of the main uses can be replaced relatively easily with non-asbestos alternatives. Although there are some temporary shortages of alternative fibres, I agree with my hon. Friend that the problem can be overcome.

The Government consider that continued use of products containing asbestos should be forcefully challenged. A prohibition on supply or use will lead to significant reductions in the overall risk to human health, by protecting current generations from exposure, so we want to move to that position with all speed.

The Government recognise, of course, that there are still some very specialised uses for which alternative fibres or processes cannot be used. However, such uses must be strictly limited in number, and allowed only where no viable alternative can be found.

Supply of the most hazardous forms of asbestos has already been banned, and we believe that the time has come to phase out remaining uses of the material altogether. There is a European Union proposal, which has been on the table for some years, for a complete ban on the supply of asbestos, with only limited derogations for genuinely essential uses. We must watch the derogations loophole carefully.

No agreement has yet been reached. It is interesting that, originally, the failure to reach agreement arose because France blocked support. Now, as my hon. Friend pointed out, the French have taken action and we believe that there is now greater urgency and a real chance to achieve an agreement that will ban white asbestos within Europe. Such a move will have our full and active support.

Naturally, we are concerned to ensure that tangible and beneficial action emerges from all that work and we are seconding to the European Commission a senior specialist on asbestos from the HSE, to lead that work and bring the prohibition into Community legislation as quickly as possible.

Irrespective of the work in Europe, we have concluded that the best course now is for us to consider what action is necessary in this country.

The Minister for the Environment and I have discussed with the Health and Safety Commission our wish for a mechanism to be put in place, as a matter of urgency, for introducing a domestic ban on the import, supply and use of all asbestos. We have asked the commission to advise us on how that could be achieved and to what timetable.

We are anxious to see urgent action, but people should understand that the Health and Safety Executive and the Health and Safety Commission have a duty to consult. We shall take speedy action that is consistent with the duty of the HSE and HSC to consult.

The risks posed by exposure to asbestos are serious and require urgent action. We shall take that urgent action and—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. We must move on to the next debate.

Oxfordshire Health Authority

1.30 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I am pleased to have the opportunity to raise the matter of the funding of Oxfordshire health authority. I am grateful to the Minister for being present to respond, given his particularly heavy work load. It may be some consolation to him to know that, when I was a junior Minister, I responded to no fewer than 65 Adjournment debates in one year, so he has some way to go yet.

The national health service budget is huge. Spending on the NHS this year will be about £725 for every man, woman and child in the United Kingdom. This year, spending on health will rise by about £1.6 billion, and spending on hospital and community health services will increase by 3 per cent. over and above inflation. I appreciate that we are dealing with substantial sums of money, which for many years have increased in real terms.

In Oxfordshire, total NHS spending this year will be about £325 million. That works out at about £540 for each man, woman and child in the county. Therein lies the problem. The national average is £725 for each person, as opposed to £540 in Oxfordshire—a difference of £185 for every man, woman and child in the county.

There is an agreed national capitation funding formula: everyone understands what it means and how it is worked out. There is no dispute that, according to the formula and its criteria, Oxfordshire is the third most underfunded health authority in England. Having regard to its population, size and other relevant factors, it is £9.6 million below target.

That underfunding is of considerable concern, given that health authorities understandably have limited scope for carrying forward recurring deficits or shortfalls on their budgets. That, straightforwardly, is the thrust of my request to the Government: that, as soon as possible, a way should be found to get Oxfordshire's funding nearer to the sums that it should receive under the national capitation funding formula.

I appreciate that this problem is not new, and that some funding formula or distribution mechanism is necessary to allocate NHS resources to different parts of the county. I also realise that, wherever and whenever a funding formula is used, there are bound to be variations in spend per head to reflect different needs and different demands. However, the position in Oxfordshire is slightly different.

The nationally agreed and recognised capitation funding formula is used to calculate how much each health authority should receive. Some authorities receive more than they should under the funding formula, whereas some, such as Oxfordshire, receive substantially less. Put simply, the Department of Health should ensure as speedily as possible that all health authorities are treated fairly and that, so far as is humanly possible, they are funded according to the national capitation funding formula.

The consequence of Oxfordshire health authority's underfunding is that, last year, it overspent by £4 million. It is required to have a sustained financial balance by March 1998. That £4 million overspend for last year must be put in the context of the £9.6 million that it is adrift from what I consider to be a fair target.

In any event, if the health authority is to have a sustained financial balance by March 1998, savings will have to be targeted on managerial and support services just to preserve existing service levels. As a consequence, significant service reductions will have to be made in Oxfordshire during the year in several trusts.

In particular, the community health trust is likely to experience emergency closures of part of one or more community hospitals. Ward closures are likely at the Oxford Radcliffe trust, and the health authority is currently discussing the implications for patient services of financial provisions within the Radcliffe infirmary trust. I am sure that the Minister will not mind if the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) briefly intervenes in the debate and takes a little of my time to explain the problems affecting hospitals in central Oxford.

Not surprisingly, Oxfordshire health authority is concerned about the relative underfunding of the NHS in Oxfordshire. It is also concerned that future formula changes could further work against Oxfordshire. To that extent, I want to put down a marker, because in my experience all Governments review the funding formula. There is a real danger that, if markers are not put down, more money will move away from shire areas, such as Oxfordshire, and into urban areas.

The impact of high wage and housing costs must be given emphasis in any new calculation, as must the impact of hosting a major teaching hospital. There is a compelling case for the NHS nationally to devote more resources to a movement towards national capitation targets; otherwise, authorities that manage their resources best will continue to be penalised.

Moreover, the financial problems experienced by Oxfordshire health authority have consequences for the whole of the country. Oxfordshire medicine is a national and international product: it attracts a high rate of national and international research income. The Oxford medical school is one of a small handful of schools that gained the highest, five-star ranking from the Higher Education Funding Council for England. If those standards are allowed to slip, the losses will not be solely Oxfordshire's, but will affect the overall advancement of medical practice and research throughout the United Kingdom.

Those worries are shared not just in the county but by the British Medical Association, which has written to me expressing concern that one of the consequences of the financial allocation for Oxfordshire will be a reduction in services provided by the Oxfordshire Mental Healthcare trust. It says that the drug and alcohol addictive behaviours unit may have to close, and argues that, given the Government's understandable commitment to addressing the wider problems of drug and alcohol addiction, it would be inappropriate to reduce such a service. All those points reflect the pressures on the health authority's budget.

I have a further specific concern. My constituency contains Horton general hospital NHS trust. Oxfordshire, with Oxford at its centre, has a huge concentration of medical expertise and experience in the John Radcliffe hospital, the Radcliffe infirmary and the teaching hospitals. For many years, there has been a general hospital in Banbury, the second largest town in the county, which is some distance from Oxford—in the north, on the Warwickshire-Northamptonshire border.

That hospital serves not just north Oxfordshire but south Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and parts of Gloucestershire. My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) and I feel that we share Horton general hospital, because so many of its patients come from south Northamptonshire.

I do not expect the Minister to respond in detail to the points that I am going to make—it would be unfair of me to do so—but I want to put down some markers. Compared with the huge central Oxfordshire complex, Horton general hospital has a very small budget—approximately £22 million a year—but it has a recurring overspend of between £700,000 and £800,000 a year, which, given its small budget, is fairly serious.

Concern has been expressed about the hospital's ability to deliver services and to meet the needs of some of the royal colleges. Consequently, an inquiry was set up last year, chaired by Mr. Arthur Davidson QC, a former Labour Member of Parliament. The inquiry took evidence, and made various recommendations. One of those recommendations was that, in the light of Horton's financial difficulties, consideration should be given to trust reconfiguration throughout Oxfordshire, which might reduce overhead costs and safeguard services.

The Davidson report was, however, very clear about the fact that any reconfiguration involving Oxford providers needed to focus on locally managed services to secure the continuation of an appropriate level of service in the north of the county—that is, Banbury—in the future. A general hospital was needed in Banbury, with services by and large managed in that hospital. Other services might be delivered elsewhere—for instance, by one of the Oxford trusts—but a locally managed NHS trust hospital was needed.

Horton general hospital NHS trust fears, given the way in which discussions about trust reconfiguration are going, that it will be asked to merge with the Oxfordshire community health trust, and that that trust will sub-contract the management of acute services at Horton to the Oxford Radcliffe hospital trust. Alternatively, it might be merged with acute hospitals in Oxford, in which case those hospitals would delegate services more appropriately dealt with by the community health trust. That, too, would effectively mean management being sub-contracted by the community health trust. In any event, the Horton trust board—along with many people associated with the hospital—fears that the hospital will effectively disappear as an entity and that all its services will be managed elsewhere.

There is a third option, which the hospital and others have been pursuing: the "Banburyshire" solution. Horton would take under its wing some services from the community health trust and some from south Northamptonshire. Although aspects of that option are administratively unattractive, particularly in Northamptonshire, a viable general hospital in Banbury would be able to continue to provide the services that it has been providing for many generations.

Horton, and people associated with it, are worried about the fact that other trusts in Oxfordshire are projecting major operating deficits. The Oxfordshire community health trust is projecting a deficit of £400,000, and the Oxford Radcliffe hospital trust one of £700,000, rising to £2 million in the next three years. The regional health authority steering group's proposals seem to have concentrated only on trying to eliminate Horton's deficits. If Horton merged, either partly or fully, with the community health trust or an acute trust that continued to experience financial difficulties, the trust involved would naturally be tempted to balance its books by cutting services at Horton.

I hope that if any proposals are conveyed to the Secretary of State about trust mergers in Oxfordshire, he will carefully consider whether they have the support of the Horton general hospital NHS trust board. The legal position relating to the dissolution of trusts, and the establishment of new trusts, is fairly complicated and it would be quite difficult to act against the express wishes of the local hospital.

As recently as 12 June, the *Health Service Journal* published a report that stated:

"There has been no evaluation of the results of trust mergers, nor is there any systematic study of the advantages and disadvantages of integrated trusts or multi-site acute trusts . . . Experience from . . . the NHS suggests that mergers based on a shared vision of the future, and by consent rather than hostile takeovers, are more likely to succeed, take less time to produce benefits, and cost less."

In April, the university of York produced some interesting research that stated that, although concentrating services through trust mergers or service rationalisation may have been seen as a way of enabling NHS purchasers and providers under pressure to reduce management and operational costs,

"there is no clear link between hospitals carrying out larger volumes of surgical procedures and having better outcomes; there is no evidence that cost savings are necessarily made by increasing hospital size above approximately 200 beds; concentrating services may reduce access to hospital care for patients living further away, particularly those who are older and poorer; experience shows that hospital mergers do not always result in the financial benefits that were initially anticipated."

I have two straightforward requests. First, I ask the Government to consider Oxfordshire health authority's funding overall. I am not asking for extra resources generally in the NHS; I am saying that existing NHS resources ought to be allocated more fairly, so that all health authorities are as near as possible to the national capitation funding formula. It seems ludicrous that authorities such as Oxfordshire should be consistently so far from the mean.

Secondly, Oxfordshire's underfunding is putting pressure on smaller units such as Horton general hospital NHS trust. I hope that if proposals are presented to the Secretary of State, he will have regard to the concerns of the trust board, those who work there and the patients whom the hospital has served, and wishes to continue to serve for many more years.

1.48 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) for allowing me time to speak. I am pleased to meet the Minister; I am sure that we will meet again on many occasions, given my interest in health.

As a former employee of the NHS and, indeed, the health authority in Oxfordshire, I have seen some of the problems described by the hon. Gentleman at first hand. I am also a product of the Oxford medical school, to which the hon. Gentleman paid tribute. I think that it is a testament to the ability of its teachers that, despite other interests that I pursued during my medical studies, I was able to graduate and pursue an NHS career.

[Dr. Evan Harris]

It is clear that Oxfordshire health authority has a funding crisis, which means that it has a service crisis. My postbag is full of complaints about the time that is taken for people to be seen and about the lack of service provision. The Minister will be pleased to know that I do not blame the current Administration for that, but I add the word "yet".

In its election campaign, Labour committed itself to "saving the NHS". In the light of advice to ask quick questions, I have a one-word question—when? The slogan "14 days to save the NHS" which was used in April is probably optimistic, as is 14 weeks. In the meantime, Oxfordshire may see the precipitate closure of the unit that cares for the young disabled, a tripling of the number of people who have to wait more than 12 months for operations, terrible cuts in the community hospital trust with which Horton hospital is mooted to be merged, and a squeeze on county council and social services spending.

All that causes short-termism. That was alluded to in remarks about threatened cuts at the Chilton clinic, which looks after drug and alcohol abusers in the county. We must also bear it in mind that, when people have to wait for operations, they may enter hospital later as emergencies, which are far more expensive to deal with.

This year, the health authority's crisis was so deep that it almost ran out of cash last month. I did my best to help by taking unpaid leave in April for another purpose, which the House may be able to guess. However, the authority is still £4 million in debt, and it faces increasing pressures and growing waiting lists. As we have heard, Oxfordshire health authority is below its target, and such authorities rely on differential allocation of growth money to move towards targets.

It is important that authorities that have carried out strategic reviews base their future allocation of funding on a presumed rate of growth which is similar to that in earlier years. As Andrew Dilnot of the Institute of Fiscal Studies has explained, we now face cuts in some years, and effectively no growth for the next three years. It will be impossible to develop or preserve services while authorities are under target and there is no growth.

I have three quick questions for the Minister. First, does he accept that, even after the £100 million efficiency savings that have been announced, more funding will be required in the NHS generally to avoid a winter crisis? I disagree with the hon. Member for Banbury on that issue, because I think that more money is needed.

Secondly, in the review of NHS spending and means of resourcing that the Secretary of State is currently undertaking, as new or increased charges are not ruled out, will higher general taxation or perhaps a new top rate of tax for those on very high incomes be considered? Perhaps that is the one measure which has been ruled out.

Thirdly, given the credit card pledge that was made during the election campaign to reduce waiting lists by 100,000, how long must we wait to see that commitment, which we support, being implemented?

1.52 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) on securing the debate, and on the terms in which he has addressed important issues about the funding of Oxfordshire health authority. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), not least for making some financial sacrifice to ensure that the health authority was better able to put more money into front-line patient services. I shall return to that theme. As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the Government inherited extreme financial difficulties, which we do not expect to solve at a stroke.

Our legacy is extremely challenging. For example, waiting lists are rising not just in Oxfordshire but in many parts of the country. That makes our desire to honour our manifesto commitment to ensure that more money is applied to front-line patient services even more imperative.

As the hon. Gentleman is aware, we have already made rapid progress by cutting management costs by £100 million in this financial year. That is just the start, and we expect to continue to bear down on unnecessary bureaucratic costs in the NHS. The Government's priority and that of all hon. Members is to ensure that cash goes to where it is most needed in the NHS—to patient services. We shall certainly honour our commitment to treat an extra 100,000 patients as soon as we are able to do so.

The Government and everyone involved in the NHS know that this year will be particularly difficult and that it will not be possible to do all we would wish to do in an ideal world. That is one reason why I am pleased to have the opportunity to debate one health authority and the issues confronting it in some detail.

As the hon. Member for Banbury rightly said, Oxfordshire health authority has some financial difficulties. For the current year, it has an integrated revenue allocation of about £236 million. In real terms, that is a growth in income from the previous year of about £5.9 million.

As the hon. Gentleman said, despite that increase, under the current formula that is used for allocating the finite pot of available funds, Oxfordshire health authority remains some way short of its target. Last year, it was short by about 5.24 per cent., and this year, following changes to the resource allocation formula and the increase in funding, the authority is about 4 per cent. short of target. As he said, in percentage terms, Oxfordshire is the third most under-target authority in England.

Much has been said about the effect of the resource allocation formula on the health authority, and I know that it is concerned about the possible effects of any future changes. However, I make it clear that much of that concern is based on pure speculation. I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would communicate that in clear and forceful terms to those in the health authority. The Government are committed to looking at how resources are distributed to primary and secondary care to ensure that they fully reflect local population needs, and that they operate as fairly as possible.

We intend to allocate resources on the basis of objective measures of need, so as to provide equitable access to care and therefore to reduce inequalities. Therefore, there may be changes to the formula which is used for allocations for the next financial year—1998–99, but at this stage neither I nor Oxfordshire health authority, despite its speculation, know what these changes amount to. As the authority has indulged in some speculation

about possible refinements to the formula and about how that could affect local residents, I shall deal rapidly with some of those points.

Oxfordshire health authority is concerned that insufficient weight is allocated to the problems associated with providing a service in a largely rural area. The hon. Member for Banbury spoke about his constituency in that regard. Research has already been commissioned to investigate the possible extra costs that are associated with the provision of accident and emergency services and ambulance services in these areas. A report is expected in the autumn and the results will be carefully considered.

Oxfordshire has a major teaching hospital, the Radcliffe, and there are certainly higher costs in such hospitals than in those that do not teach medical students. Those additional costs are met from the service increment for teaching levy, which is paid directly to the hospitals concerned. Of all the health authorities that host major teaching hospitals, Oxfordshire has received the highest growth in its general revenue allocation.

In the context of the current formula and allocation, I shall now look at how Oxfordshire health authority is coping with the pressures that face it. As I have said, the Government inherited some financial difficulties from the previous Administration, and Oxfordshire health authority is not exempt from that pain. For the financial year that has just ended, the authority has a net forecast outturn deficit of some £2.9 million. Those are the latest figures and they may be subject to revision. The health authority is planning to rectify that financial imbalance during the current year. Consequently, it will have to face some painful decisions.

I understand that the chief executive of the authority has chosen to set the scene for those difficult choices in some colourful language, which was repeated by the hon. Member for Banbury, about the authority potentially "running out of pound notes". That colourful language is unhelpful, not least because it detracts from the serious efforts that are being made by the health authority to achieve financial balance. For example, I was struck by its establishment of a priorities forum, which is a good principle and a good idea. It has already started to reduce costs through the latest round of contracting with local hospitals.

I shall now deal with the issue that the hon. Member for Banbury raised about his local hospital, the Horton. A thorough review of the provision of health services for the people of Banbury and the surrounding areas has resulted in some interesting recommendations and a steering group of wide membership has been established to oversee their implementation. That is a good example of health authorities, trusts and local people working together to find solutions to problems rather than simply calling for more money or jumping to quick and easy solutions.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman and local people will support the review and will participate fully when preferred options are put before them for consultation later in the year. I shall bear in mind the hon. Gentleman's points. He has established firm stakes in the ground and we shall bear that in mind.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half past Two o'clock.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

Mental Health Services (North Gwent)

1. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has for the development of mental health services in north Gwent. [2594]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Win Griffiths): Gwent health authority is reviewing its mental health strategy. That review will be completed by November, when the authority will consider the options available to it.

Mr. Edwards: I congratulate my hon. Friend and the rest of the team on their appointment. For the first time in a long time, the Secretary of State for Wales represents a Welsh constituency.

May I express my concern at Gwent health authority's decision to cancel the Red Barn development—which was to be a new, modern psychiatric facility, following the closure of Pen-y-fal hospital—at the business ethos in the health service and at the way in which the private finance initiative is inappropriately used these days for services for mentally ill patients, including elderly people?

Mr. Griffiths: I thank my hon. Friend for his congratulations to the whole Welsh Office team.

My hon. Friend will appreciate that the Red Barn PFI was taken before we came to power; the fact that it has not been able to proceed seems to show that it was not given the fullest consideration at the outset. However, I assure him that the patients from Pen-y-fal hospital have been moved to Maindiff Court hospital, where there are better facilities. If he has any reservations about what is happening there, I would of course be happy to hear from him. Gwent health authority is consulting widely on its proposals and I will want to be assured that any alternative that it brings forward will meet the needs of elderly mentally ill people in his constituency and throughout Gwent.

Minimum Wage (Clothing Industry)

2. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate his Department has made of the number of manual jobs in the Welsh clothing industry that would be lost as a result of the introduction of a minimum wage of £4 an hour. [2595]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): We will ask the Low Pay Commission, before it reaches a recommendation on the level at which the national minimum wage might be set, to take into account all the economic circumstances, including its likely impact on jobs in the Welsh clothing industry. I do not expect any jobs to be lost.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Is it not clear that the Government have rushed into a commitment to a minimum wage without any clear idea of what the consequences might be? More than 200,000 people in Wales earn less than £4 an hour. In, for example, the clothing industry, the likely result of a minimum wage is that businesses will either close or invest in automation, so that, far from there being a minimum wage, there will be no wage at all.

Mr. Hain: On the contrary, more and more businesses are coming out in support of the principle of a minimum wage. The hon. Gentleman probably has not read this morning's *Western Mail*, as he is not a Welsh Member of Parliament, but it reports that the Federation of Small Businesses, which I am meeting tomorrow, has welcomed a minimum wage and is willing to discuss how it should be implemented.

Mr. Wigley: Further to the Minister's comment a moment ago, does he accept that when the Federation of Small Businesses met in Llandudno in March, it voted in favour of a minimum wage order? It wants the minimum wage to be introduced in a coherent manner. Does the Minister accept that no Member of Parliament representing Wales would want people to earn £2 or £2.50 an hour as a means of competing with sweatshops in third-world countries? What we need to do in Wales, in the clothing industry and elsewhere, is to compete on quality, as we do with shops and businesses such as Laura Ashley and as we can do in a range of businesses, given a fair opportunity?

Mr. Hain: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman, who makes the crucial point that Wales's only future as a world-beating economy is to be the best and not to go down the sweatshop economy route. I do not think that any Conservative Member would dare—perhaps some Conservatives would—pay someone in his employment just £2.50 an hour, yet that is what almost 60,000 workers in Wales earn. It is an absolute disgrace. A low pay strategy, through the minimum wage that the new Labour Government will implement, is designed to tackle that.

Welsh Assembly

3. **Dr. Marek:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the proposed powers for the Welsh Assembly. [2596]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Ron Davies): The Welsh Assembly will provide democratic control of the existing Welsh Office functions; it will have power to make secondary legislation; and it will have specific powers to reform and control the quangos in Wales.

Dr. Marek: My right hon. Friend knows that I support him in his policy and will be campaigning on his side during the referendum campaign. He knows that he does not have to answer my question or even answer a different one, and he could give me a facetious answer. However, I ask him to give me a rational answer to the question why the Welsh people cannot be trusted with a question on the referendum paper about tax-varying powers for the Welsh Assembly. They should be able to say yes or no to that. After all, it is a power that even English parish councils have.

Mr. Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his promise of support in the forthcoming referendum. It is

precisely because we trust the people of Wales that we propose to vest in them the power to take greater control of their own affairs.

In relation to the tax-varying powers of a Scottish Parliament, there are procedures in Westminster for the establishment of a separate body of Scots law. We believe it to be important that that provision, when it is transferred to the Scottish Parliament, is married to the ability to vary tax rates. We are not proposing that such a provision be devolved to Wales, so it follows that we are not proposing that tax-varying powers be devolved to Wales.

Mr. Hague: If, as the Secretary of State intends, any future Welsh Assembly takes over the powers and functions of the office of Secretary of State, is he proposing that his office will continue in existence and that his salary will remain the same?

Mr. Davies: I am glad that the shadow Secretary of State is in his place; it looks as though he will continue for some time in that role. I am surprised that he did not take the opportunity of this first Welsh questions to announce yet another policy initiative, as he seems to have developed a remarkable intellectual flexibility.

I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the excellent speech made in the House of Lords yesterday by a former Welsh Minister, Viscount St. Davids. He made a forceful speech in favour of Welsh devolution. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we will be successful in our campaign to get democracy back to Wales. The role of Secretary of State will continue and we have no proposals to vary the salary of the office of Secretary of State.

Mr. Llew Smith: Is there any substance to the rumour that the original idea of 60 people serving on the Welsh Assembly has changed and the number has been increased to 80? What income levels are proposed for those people?

Mr. Davies: The proposal for a 60-person Assembly was the product of a lengthy debate in the Labour party in Wales. Our policy was adopted unanimously at our conference, held between 28 February and 1 March. It was included in the proposals that we put before all the people of Britain, which were unanimously endorsed in the general election on 1 May. We will include the detail in our White Paper, which will be published before the start of the recess. We have no proposals to vary our policy. The details of the salaries to be paid to Assembly persons will also be published in the White Paper.

Devolution

4. **Mr. Bernard Jenkin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received on the question to be put to Welsh local government electors as proposed in the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill. [2597]

Mr. Win Griffiths: We have received several.

Mr. Jenkin: Can the Minister explain why the Welsh people will not be offered in the referendum the option of an Assembly with tax-raising powers? In Scotland, a Parliament without tax-raising powers is regarded by the Secretary of State for Scotland as a non sequitur.

Mr. Griffiths: If the hon. Gentleman had arrived but two minutes earlier, he would have heard a full response to that question. I shall explain to him once more that the circumstances of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly are different. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why?"] They are different because we have put the proposals to the people. I remind Opposition Members that they were badly defeated on 1 May. We are happy to hold the referendums, for an Assembly without tax-raising powers in Wales and for a Parliament with tax-varying powers in Scotland.

Mr. Llwyd: Will the Minister please confirm that the Welsh Assembly will have the power, or be obliged, to consider the overall structural approach in Wales, with regard to the Welsh Development Agency and the Development Board for Rural Wales? He will know, as all Welsh Members know, that the imbalance between job creation and investment in the east of Wales and that in the west has caused great concern. Is that not one sure subject for the Welsh Assembly to consider as soon as possible?

Mr. Griffiths: The hon. Gentleman will know that we have already announced that we will make an effort to extend prosperity throughout Wales, concentrating especially on western areas. I am sure that proposals will be made in the White Paper and that the Assembly will wish to pursue the matter with great vigour.

Public Spending

5. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his Department's current budget for the level of public spending for the present and next financial year. [2598]

Mr. Ron Davies: My Department's budget for the current financial year is £6,894 million and, for 1998–99, £6,877 million.

Mr. Jack: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Can he give me an assurance that those spending ceilings will be adhered to for the next two financial years? Can he also give me an assurance that the ceilings for the departments within that expenditure total will remain unaltered for the next two years? If the Secretary of State is unable to give me satisfaction on those two points, will he undertake to publish details of any changes that he may wish to make over those two financial years?

Mr. Ron Davies: On the first question, I can give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. He was a Treasury Minister in the previous Government and followed the matters very closely, so I know that he will be pleased with that answer.

On the second question, the right hon. Gentleman would expect the Government to review all their spending plans, and we are doing that. My objective in the Welsh Office is to ensure that the expenditure that we will incur in the current year and in the next year better reflects our priorities. It follows from that that any changes we make to departmental expenditure will be published and we will allow hon. Members the opportunity to question the revised figures.

Mr. Denzil Davies: Will my right hon. Friend not listen to the former Financial Secretary or the siren voices

from the Treasury? There is plenty of money around. The dreaded public sector borrowing requirement is falling even faster than anticipated, the contingency reserve has not been touched and, no doubt, the Treasury mandarins will come up with a few tax wheezes in the Budget. Will my right hon. Friend therefore press for more money for public services in Wales, because the health service, in particular, cannot take any more cuts?

Mr. Ron Davies: The message from the Treasury is not exactly that the country is awash with money. Details of the Budget are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Any representations made will be from within the ranks of Government and we will all have to wait until Budget day to find out their success or otherwise.

Mr. Livsey: Will the Secretary of State please assure the House that he will continue with the Barnett formula for funding public expenditure in Wales? In the advent of a Welsh Assembly, will he put the formula into a statutory framework?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Barnett formula deals with the increases in the level of Welsh public expenditure, not with the block grant per se. The matters to which he refers are under discussion and we will make the full details available in the White Paper when we publish it next month.

Mr. Barry Jones: I congratulate my right hon. Friend and wish him well in the important work that he has to do for the people of Wales. Will he bear in mind the difficulties in primary schools in my constituency, for example, which need more teachers? Will his spending plans for the next year enable such help to be given?

Mr. Davies: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's good wishes and I know that he will continue to give whatever service he can, both to his constituents and in sustaining the Government. He will know that one of the Government's established priorities is to reduce class sizes in primary schools. The Under-Secretary with responsibility for those matters, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), has already taken early action in Wales to abolish the wasteful, bureaucratic and divisive nursery voucher system. We will move as quickly as we can to put resources into the primary sector, to fulfil our principal objective of reducing class sizes.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: I welcome the Secretary of State to his appointment and wish him well in his duties. He will recall that the previous Administration, in their spending plans for Wales, originally made a commitment to spend public money to dual the A55 across the island of Anglesey. He will also know that the previous Secretary of State whipped away that money without telling anyone why he was doing so. Will the current Secretary of State assure me that the Government are committed to completing the programme and tell me how Ministers propose to finance it?

Mr. Davies: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that, during the general election, I took a close interest in progress on the A55, and it is a matter of some regret that I was not successful in unseating him in that election. I should say that I make those remarks in a spirit of good humour, and I thank him for his good wishes.

The Government are committed to completing the A55, and the Under-Secretary with responsibility for those matters, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath, is examining ways in which we can proceed. As I said, we are committed to the project, and I should like it to be completed as quickly as possible.

Mr. Hague: Can the Secretary of State clarify for the House whether, in future Budgets, the running costs of the proposed Welsh Assembly will be drawn from the Welsh block grant or supplied by all United Kingdom taxpayers?

Mr. Davies: We have already made those points abundantly clear. In debate on the referendum proposals, the shadow Secretary of State asked several times about meeting the costs of the referendum. We made it—

Mr. Ian Bruce: Answer the question.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman must contain himself, because I will answer the question. I know that he is an excitable fellow and that, today, there is a particularly febrile mood among Conservative Members. Nevertheless, a question has been asked and I will answer it.

The shadow Secretary of State will know that, during debate on referendum legislation and funding, we provided detailed answers to his question. He will also know that we have promised a White Paper, which will be available in July and contain full details of the cost and funding of the Assembly. He will undoubtedly still be shadow Secretary of State in July, and we can return to the matter then.

Inward Investment

6. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals he has to attract more inward investment into Wales. [2599]

Mr. Hain: Our commitments to improve the skills levels of our people, create a buoyant economy, improve the infrastructure and take a positive attitude towards the European Union and our proposals to create an economic powerhouse will make Wales even more attractive to inward investors.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the reasons for the previous Government's extremely successful record of attracting inward investment to Wales were flexible labour policies, the lowest corporation tax in the Group of Seven and a willingness to fight for a free and fair market in Europe? If he does not agree with that analysis, how does he plan to encourage inward investment on the scale shown by LG, creating 6,000 jobs?

Mr. Hain: The reason LG came to Wales was that it knew that a Labour Government were on the way. The hon. Gentleman is completely ignorant of the reasons for the success of inward investment in Wales. The success

is due to the Welsh Development Agency, which was established by a Labour Government, pursuing policies of intervention and partnership—which were anathema to the Thatcherite, free-market dogma that, over the past 18 years, has destroyed jobs in Wales. Such dogma is why the Conservative party was wiped out in Wales.

Mr. Donald Anderson: Does my hon. Friend agree that a new and very positive factor in inward investment decisions is that we no longer have a Government who are involved in Euro-bashing for the purposes of their own internal civil war but have a Government who, as was shown at the Amsterdam Council, are determined to play a full partnership role in Europe?

Mr. Hain: I agree with my hon. Friend, although whether the civil war will continue in the Conservative party remains to be seen. Certainly, the Laurel and Hardy act now about to take over the Tory party bodes ill for it.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Will the hon. Gentleman tell the House, as his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State could not, whether the money that is currently going to the Welsh Development Agency and is helping to bring investment to Wales will be reduced by the costs of having a Welsh Assembly? We know that the referendum will be paid for by the UK taxpayer, but we do not yet know whether it is to be paid for out of the Welsh Office vote and therefore out of the money going to Welsh development.

Mr. Hain: The answer is no. Indeed, it was the Conservative Government who were responsible in recent years for fleecing the WDA of many of its resources. We intend to strengthen the WDA in a new powerhouse for Wales, working with the Welsh Assembly to bring new investment, jobs, opportunities and prosperity.

Welsh Development Agency

7. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his plans for the future operation of the Welsh Development Agency. [2600]

Mr. Ron Davies: The future of the Welsh Development Agency is being considered as part of our commitment to establish an economic powerhouse for Wales. That economic powerhouse will have a secure future. It will have funding on a sustainable basis and will be increasingly responsive to local needs.

Mr. Williams: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new responsibilities.

Notwithstanding the excellent work of the WDA over many years, my right hon. Friend will realise that there has been a substantial imbalance between east and west in its work, to the extent that about 80 per cent. of the inward investment, jobs and resources go to south-east Wales and to Clwyd, and only about 20 per cent. come west of Swansea and to Gwynedd. What steps does my right hon. Friend intend to take to readjust that balance so that we get fair shares across Wales?

Mr. Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his good wishes.

I acknowledge that, in recent years, there has been an imbalance in the rate of economic development in Wales. I recently met the chairman of the WDA and emphasised to him how important it is that we spread economic prosperity across the whole of Wales.

Of course, west Wales is one of the priority targets. There are some 620 acres under consideration for development in the west of Wales. The Velindre site is particularly important and is one of the best large-scale inward investment opportunities available in Wales. I want the WDA and the local authorities in the area to agree a joint venture on its promotion. If that comes about, I shall certainly give that site my full backing.

Post-16 Education

8. **Mr. Touhig:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what are his proposals for post–16 education in Wales. [2601]

Mr. Hain: All young people will be offered part-time or full-time education post-16. Any under 18-year-old in a job will have the right to study on an approved course for qualifications at college. We will also promote learning throughout adult life.

Mr. Touhig: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new responsibilities at the Welsh Office.

Is my hon. Friend aware of the report by the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs into further education which called for a more coherent strategy in the education of 16 to 19-year-olds? Will he take the steps necessary to end the damaging competition between colleges of further education, school sixth forms and training and enterprise councils, which the previous Government simply failed to do? Will he help to ensure the development of tertiary education throughout Wales, which offers students the widest possible choice of A-level and vocational courses—choices which we shall need if we are to create a highly skilled work force in a modern economy?

Mr. Hain: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. There is a damaging free-for-all in this sector of education provision which is infected by too much competition, waste and unnecessary duplication. That does not get the best out of the available resources or provide the best opportunities for our people. We shall review the entire sector, and in our White Paper to be published next month we shall propose steps to eliminate all those problems and provide a much better future for our people.

Mr. Evans: Does the Minister agree that those families who have 16 to 18-year-olds in full-time education find the payment of child benefit extremely useful? Will he tell the House whether he will fight to ensure that those payments continue for 16 to 18-year-olds in full-time education?

Mr. Hain: The real problem for 16 to 18-year-olds is the dreadful legacy left by the Conservative Government, with rising unemployment in many parts of Wales in that section of the work force. We will provide new opportunities, new support, new training, new education opportunities and new jobs under the welfare-to-work programme, which will be financed out of a windfall tax on the privatised utilities.

Educational Opportunities

9. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what new proposals he has to widen opportunity in education in Wales. [2602]

Mr. Hain: The Government will widen educational opportunity at every level. We will strengthen nursery provision; we will develop an improved qualifications framework which will prepare young people for employment, as well as for further study; and we will make it easier for adult learners to continue to study throughout their lives.

Mr. Flynn: I add my "croeso a llongyfarchiadau" to my hon. Friend on his new post.

New jobs are coming to my constituency from LG's investment, which was made in the certain knowledge that a Labour Government and a Welsh Assembly were on the way. Does my hon. Friend agree that although industry should provide the major part of training for new jobs, the Government must lend a hand, especially in providing for adults whose careers have been broken by redundancy and unemployment? Will he give an assurance today that there will be new initiatives from the new Government, especially in the form of a university for industry?

Mr. Hain: I thank my hon. Friend—"diolch yn fawr".

We will certainly do as my hon. Friend urges and pursue active policies to provide new skills and training opportunities. I met the senior managers of LG on Monday and we are working in partnership with them to provide the best skills base for that important investment, so that the Welsh economy in my hon. Friend's constituency and in south Wales can move forward confidently.

Mr. Dafis: I draw the Minister's attention for the second time today to the predicament of higher education in Wales and the profound concerns arising from the present and predicted cuts in the higher education sector in Wales. Does he recognise that that sector is important, not only as a provider of education but as a component in economic revitalisation? Will the Welsh Office undertake to reverse those cuts next year, so that higher education institutions in Wales can take their place within an integrated strategy for sustainable economic development?

Mr. Hain: We will review all education provision in Wales, including the sector that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. We will also propose a new way forward for Wales in school education, further education and higher education in our White Paper, which is to be published next month. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's contribution to that debate.

NHS Trusts (Running Costs)

10. **Mrs. Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the running costs of NHS trusts in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [2603]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The Government believe that, within the constraints imposed by the need to manage a complex organisation, management and administrative costs should be reduced to the minimum possible. We are committed to ensuring that savings can be identified and used for patient care; NHS trusts will contribute their share. In so doing, we have already announced the suspension of the extension of the GP fundholding scheme, pointed to practical ways of changing the internal market—*[Interruption.]*—and announced a review of the number and configuration of trusts in Wales, which should lead to a new pattern of trust-based services. I am glad that Conservative Members cheered my announcement.

Mrs. Clwyd: Is my hon. Friend aware that, one week after the election, the North Glamorgan NHS trust announced that it had to make savings of £750,000 and that the axe is now hanging over various services in Aberdare, including the rehabilitation ward, respite care and day surgery? May I say to him, very kindly, that the people of the Cynon valley voted Labour for a better NHS, not a worse one?

Mr. Griffiths: I have undertaken to visit North Glamorgan NHS trust. I am aware of its financial problems, but I have been informed that it intends to carry out a cost improvement programme, which will mean that all its existing contracts can continue to be fulfilled.

Mr. Burns: Can the hon. Gentleman give the House a categorical assurance that the obscenity of possible charges for hospital stays, for visiting a GP and for some prescriptions for pensioners will not happen in Wales?

Mr. Griffiths: I assure the shadow Minister that, under our current review of spending in Wales, all those proposals are not within the orbit of our consideration. Any discussion of those matters will be conducted at a United Kingdom level.

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Visit (North Wiltshire)

Q1. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to visit north Wiltshire. [2574]

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): I have no plans to visit north Wiltshire at the present time.

Mr. Gray: When he does, will the Prime Minister take the opportunity to visit Chippenham livestock market to speak to farmers, who are confident that the beef ban will have been at the top of his personal agenda in Amsterdam? If their confidence is well founded, will he explain the omission of any mention of beef in the presidency's conclusions?

The Prime Minister: I am surprised that any Conservative Member has the nerve to raise the subject of beef, given what we inherited from the previous Government. I raised that matter on several occasions well before the Amsterdam summit. I am pleased to say that we are making progress, but, because we inherited probably the most incompetent mess that any Government

have ever inherited, it will take a little time. However, I think that the hon. Gent's constituents will get the deal that they need.

Engagements

Q2. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 18 June. [2575]

The Prime Minister: I returned from the European summit in Amsterdam this morning. Later today, I shall be making a statement to the House and having meetings with ministerial colleagues and others.

Mr. Cunningham: Does my right hon. Friend agree with Shelter that homeless people should benefit as more and more council accommodation becomes available as a result of the release of capital receipts?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One reason why we are introducing legislation on capital receipts is to allow local authorities the prospect of making that money work for local people and of building homes for the homeless. In addition, as a result of the windfall tax on the excess profits of the privatised utilities, young people will be given the chance to get decent skills and education. The combination of those two measures will at least begin to put right the appalling levels of homelessness that we inherited from the Conservative Government.

Mr. Major: Can the Prime Minister confirm that once his Government have completed their review of the national health service, all pensioners will still receive free prescriptions as of right?

The Prime Minister: This will be the right hon. Gentleman's very last Question Time. I should like simply to wish him well, as I am sure that the whole House will, and to say that, however strong our clashes were, he always behaved good naturedly and with dignity.

In respect of the review of the national health service, once one starts ruling things out, people say, "You have ruled this in; you have ruled that out." I can assure the right hon. Gentleman of one thing: that, at the end of the review, we shall have a national health service that is fully consistent with the principles that we have set out. Those principles are that the health service will be based on need, not ability to pay, and will be fully consistent with our manifesto. He should not pay too much attention to stories in the press.

Mr. Major: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's graceful remarks at the outset, but not very enlightened by the rest of his reply. It did not answer my question, and it amounted to a definite "maybe".

I should like to quote what the Secretary of State for Education and Employment said that

"charges are nothing more than an alternative form of taxation, regressive and highly damaging. In the case of the NHS, this amounts to a medical poll tax."

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do—which is one reason why we want to review many of the charges imposed by the Conservative Government over a period of 18 years.

Mr. Luff: You are in government now.

The Prime Minister: Yes, we are. Our big problem is the mess that we were left by the previous Government. We shall be looking, for instance, at the prescriptions fraud, which costs about £85 million a year. We shall also look at another situation we have inherited: 59 out of 100 health authorities are in deficit, as a result of the Conservative Government. That is why it is sensible for any Government to look at getting value for money in the national health service. But we shall make sure that that is consistent with principle and with our manifesto commitments.

Mr. Major: I am tempted to ask whether anyone in the House has the faintest idea what that nonsense meant. I am even tempted to ask for a show of hands among Labour Members. Let me try and help the right hon. Gentleman. As a matter of principle, will he or will he not rule out prescription charges for pensioners and so-called hotel charges for hospital visits—a straightforward yes or no?

The Prime Minister: As I have already told the right hon. Gentleman, these matters are the result of press speculation. The review that we will carry out should be open ended. If we rule in this and rule out that, people will conclude that what has not been ruled out is ruled in and vice versa. It is nonsense.

The right hon. Gentleman asked for a clear statement on the NHS so I shall give him one. We will have a national health service restored to the basic principles of the British NHS—the health service that we founded and the Conservative Government undermined. The right hon. Gentleman's Government spent £1.75 billion on health service bureaucracy. We shall spend that money on patient care. We will also look at the right way of getting value for money in the NHS—not by Tory methods but by ensuring that people get a fair deal once again from the health service.

Mr. Major: The more the right hon. Gentleman goes off the point, the more he loses the point. I think that we now know the answer: it is yes. If the Prime Minister can get away with it, there will be charges. I see the Chancellor of the Exchequer nodding. I repeat: if the Prime Minister can get away with it, there will be pensioner prescription charges and hotel charges. How does that square with his manifesto promise, which reads:

"if you are ill or injured there will be a national health service here to help; and access to it will be based on need and need alone"?

No mention of charges there.

The Prime Minister: I reconfirm precisely those words here today. The cheek of this lot talking about the health service! Who put up prescription charges 15 times? Who ran the national health service in such a way that people had to take up private health care because they could not

get proper health care in the health service? Who ended their term of office with 20,000 more managers and 50,000 fewer nurses in the service?

Mr. Evans: What about the pensioners?

The Prime Minister: What indeed? We would not have imposed VAT on pensioners' fuel. The idea that the Conservative party can ever have any credibility on the health service is a joke. Ours is the party that built it and will reform it. We will do that in the right way, based on need, not ability to pay.

Mr. Major: That was all very interesting, but it had nothing to do with my question, which the right hon. Gentleman has dodged time and again. Does not his sorry inability to answer a straightforward, direct question illustrate what we are learning about him daily? During the election, the right hon. Gentleman was prepared to frighten pensioners by saying that their pensions were at risk, and he is now prepared to put their free national health service treatment at risk. Is that what he meant when he asked the British nation to trust him?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman asks why I could not answer his question straight. He asked me whether I agreed with the words of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education, and I said yes. I cannot get much straighter than that. I do agree with my right hon. Friend.

Who introduced charges for eye tests? The Conservatives did. Who introduced dental charges? [HON. MEMBERS: "They did."] Who ran the national health service in such a way that in many parts of the country there is no NHS dental treatment? [HON. MEMBERS: "They did."] I say to the right hon. Gentleman with great respect that the Conservatives will never be believed about the national health service—not in a million years—because of what they have done. People know that there are difficult choices to be made, and they want a party that believes in the health service to make them.

Q3. **Dr. Marek:** Has the Prime Minister anything against the Committee that is to consider the modernisation and workings of the House considering the oath that we must take to sit in this place, and possibly providing an alternative oath that Members could swear, genuinely upholding peace, democracy and human rights? If that were possible, it might just help the United Kingdom and make the House of Commons a more inclusive Chamber. [2576]

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has already made it clear that there are no plans to change the oath of allegiance. I am sorry if that reply disappoints my hon. Friend, but it is the reply that I must give.

Mr. Ashdown: May I take a moment to echo the words of the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the leader of the Conservative party and former Prime Minister? The right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) and I, too, have had sharp words at times—they may have been worse than that sometimes—but in our private dealings he was unfailingly courteous and, more than that, unfailingly straight. He is the fourth longest-serving Prime Minister this century, he led the country in time of war, he gave Ireland a chance for peace, and I venture to say that he is the only leader of the Conservative party who might have kept that lot together for the past three or four years. For that, the Conservatives should be grateful to him and we shall miss him—I think.

I now address the present Prime Minister. May we take it as read between us that everyone in the House will support the Government in bearing down on public expenditure? Do the Government yet realise that unless they can find a way out of the corner into which they have painted themselves, whereby they cannot even use the savings from other areas of Government expenditure to increase expenditure on health and education, the crisis in our schools and hospitals this winter will be as bad as or worse than any that we experienced in the Conservative years?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has raised the matter before. We are making savings and changing resources within the public spending totals—for example, in bureaucracy in the national health service, by phasing out the assisted places scheme to reduce class sizes, and under the windfall tax. The direct increase in expenditure as a result of the windfall tax will have a benefit and will produce knock-on savings in the welfare payments being paid out.

As I explained to the right hon. Gentleman last week, it is a matter not of painting ourselves into a corner, but of the public finances that we inherited. Under the Conservatives, as he knows, the national debt doubled. We will pay out a substantial amount this year in interest payments on that debt, even more than we will spend on law and order. For that reason, we must make sure that we keep a tight grip on public spending.

Mr. Ashdown: Let me make the Prime Minister a proposition. The last Government spent almost £1 billion on private consultants. If this Government were able to save £500 million on private consultants, would it then be their policy not to transfer that money in order to save teachers' jobs and prevent a winter crisis in our hospital wards? If so, I assure the Prime Minister that the millions of people who voted for his party and for mine will simply not understand why their hopes for better public services should be reduced to such dogma.

The Prime Minister: It is not dogmatic. Of course I am not trying to suggest that if there are sensible savings to be made, we cannot use them. The right hon. Gentleman says that we could find £1 billion in savings on private consultants, but there is no evidence of that. Savings can and will be made, but we will not be able to solve all the problems of the education system in the way that he suggests. It is more of a deception to try to pretend that than to face people and the responsibilities of government by ensuring that we do our best to get extra resources into the system. We will do that.

We can get additional resources because of the choices that we are making. The right hon. Gentleman kindly said that he had a proposition for me; I shall put one to him. If he is serious about doing something to reduce expenditure on waste in the system, would it not be better

for his party to support the windfall tax to give us the chance to provide young people with the skills and education that they need?

Q4. **Mr. Connarty:** The Prime Minister will recall in his recent people's question time being asked whether he would ensure that he considers the proposition that the sequestrated assets of criminals be used to finance better witness protection schemes. He may also be aware that I have raised in the House several times the tragedy of a beautiful village in my constituency that has been turned into the village from hell by a few vicious families against whom no one will go witness. Given that many people are now afraid to give evidence in court, will he ensure that the proposition put to him is given serious and urgent consideration? [2577]

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. *[Interruption.]* I find it extraordinary that Opposition Members seem to find this sort of matter amusing—or the idea that we should go out and talk to the public. They should understand that that is one of the reasons why they lost the last election.

Yes, I think it important that we examine the best protection that can be given to witnesses. As a result of the suggestions that were made last week when we conducted discussions in Worcester, we shall look specifically at two of the points put to us: first, at how to give better protection to witnesses so that they do not have to sit in the same room as defendants in court—victims occasionally have to do that also; and, secondly, at how the funds reclaimed from the proceeds of crime may be used to benefit people by preventing crime and by tackling some of the problems within the criminal justice system.

Mr. Maginnis: At a time when two murdered Royal Ulster Constabulary officers are being laid to rest—one of them in my constituency—will the Prime Minister reflect on the fact that Sinn Fein-IRA perversely exploit attempts by world leaders, such as President Clinton, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) and himself, as they seek to encourage a sincere political process in Northern Ireland? Is the Prime Minister determined that such cruel mockery now necessitates his proverbial peace train leaving the station without Sinn Fein-IRA, who have again and again shown themselves to be ruthless killers and politically irredeemable?

The Prime Minister: First, may I say in response to the hon. Gentleman that the whole House expresses its sympathy for the victims of the appalling and callous murders earlier in the week. We extend our sympathy particularly to the families and to the young children who have been left without fathers. This was a wicked act for very obvious reasons. However, to respond directly to the hon. Gentleman's point, it was a doubly wicked act as those responsible knew perfectly well about the chances and opportunities being taken to try to put the process back on track and reach a lasting political settlement. I believe—I think that the Taoiseach, the Irish Prime Minister, also believes—that that was done quite deliberately to frustrate this process, so it was a wicked and callous act. I agree precisely with the sentiments that the hon. Gentleman has expressed in respect of Sinn Fein-IRA.

Q5. **Mr. Rhodri Morgan:** Were there any discussions at the Amsterdam summit about the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and its impact on modern Europe, or about any other more contemporary political alliances on the future of Europe between total political opposites in a marriage of modern political public convenience, such as that between the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) and the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), which was announced this morning? [2578]

The Prime Minister: I was sitting at the Amsterdam summit opposite President Chirac and Mr. Jospin, little knowing that when I returned to Britain the concept of cohabitation would have descended upon the British Conservative party.

Mr. Key: I am sure that the Prime Minister would agree that Britain's tourist industry is extremely important and that our built heritage and natural heritage are the reasons for that industry. Does he therefore agree that the visitor facilities at Stonehenge remain a national disgrace? Given that no millennium money from the national lottery or taxpayers' money will be spent on it, will he consider closing Stonehenge this autumn to give the Government breathing space to think up a sensible solution to what has become a national disgrace and could become a national scandal?

The Prime Minister: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern about Stonehenge, which he has expressed over many years. According to the advice that we have received from English Heritage, it is neither necessary nor sensible to close Stonehenge. He will be aware, however, that discussions are going on with English Heritage about how Stonehenge could be improved. We take an interest in that and hope that those discussions will succeed. I believe that half a million people, or perhaps almost 1 million people, visit Stonehenge every year. It is obviously a national monument of great importance and we will do whatever we can to safeguard it. I am advised, however, that its closure is neither necessary nor sensible.

Q6. **Mr. McNulty:** Does the Prime Minister agree that the repeated assurances of the previous Government that class sizes had no consequence on educational performance defied the instincts of all parents and common sense? [2579]

The Prime Minister: I agree entirely. There is absolutely overwhelming evidence to suggest that smaller class sizes are absolutely essential for five, six and seven-year-olds to give them a decent education. More than 500,000 children of those ages are in classes of more than 30. I think that anyone would understand that, in those circumstances, a child is less able to get the basic grounding in literacy and numeracy that he needs, and on which we have fallen behind. That is why I urge Conservative Members, even at this late stage, to support our Bill, which would allow us to use public money for public education.

Mr. Boswell: The Prime Minister will not mind, I am sure, if I return to the important subject of public

expenditure. In the light of a recent written answer that I received, which suggested that there is no intention of revealing the additional spending commitments of his Government, will he please tell the House whether that is a failure on the part of the machinery of government or simply of inclination?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman waits for the Budget, which will be presented shortly, when we will make any such commitments as we may have perfectly clear to him.

Sanctions (Libya)

Q7. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will discuss with President Clinton the consequences for policy in relation to approaching the UN to lift sanctions against Libya of the acquittal of Juval Aviv by an American court. [2580]

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, Juval Aviv has been acquitted by an American court. We are also aware of the allegations that have been made by him, but the advice that I have received is that it does not alter the case that the existing evidence in respect of those who perpetrated the Lockerbie bombing suggests that it was carried out by Libyans.

I believe that the United Nations Security Council sanctions should remain until the Security Council resolutions are properly and fully complied with; they are not being complied with at the moment.

Mr. Dalyell: If that is the case, and in the light of last Wednesday's Adjournment debate when I told of the scepticism of Professor Robert Black, professor of Scots law at the university of Edinburgh, and the profound scepticism of Peter Anderson of Simpson Marwick—after all, that firm acted as the lawyers for Pan Am—do we have the Prime Minister's assurance that he is absolutely sure that the Crown Office has the evidence to prosecute successfully, which it has claimed to have? If there is a scintilla of doubt about the advice that he has received, would he consider appointing either a European judge or a judge of the Court of Appeal in England to examine what the Crown Office says that it has?

The Prime Minister: The short answer is that the advice that I have received is that the evidence is still clear on this point. Partly as a result of the trial of Mr. Aviv, and as a result of many other allegations and counter-allegations that are made, which are sifted carefully, the process is kept under continual review and re-evaluation, as it should be. At present, the evidence is still clear, in so far as there is evidence about who perpetrated the Lockerbie bomb, and it points to Libyan involvement. The United Nations Security Council resolutions are still in place because they have not been complied with. Until they are, in my view those sanctions should remain.

Sir Teddy Taylor: In view of the real agony sustained by the relatives of those who lost their lives in this dreadful bombing, would the Prime Minister be at least willing to make a positive and constructive approach to Libya to ensure that the trial takes place, especially as Libya has offered to hand over the two suspects to a third country? Might not an ideal compromise be a trial in Malta, where it is alleged that the disaster was initiated? Would not the Prime Minister be willing to try to get a trial somewhere and somehow to bring relief to the relatives?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the plain fact is that there is the opportunity of having a trial if the suspects are handed over. I do not believe that it is fair to say that a trial, for example, in Scotland, would be unfair in any shape or form. I think that that would be a wrong reflection on the legal system there. Of course, we continually try every avenue that we can to make progress in this matter, but I do not think that I can hold out some hope to the hon. Gentleman that we will reverse the policy that the previous Government adopted, which, in this instance at least, I support.

Engagements

Q8. **Mr. Kemp:** Has my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister authorised any of his officials to make a statement that appeared in today's press to the effect that the future of the Conservative party is in the hands of 38 people from the planet Zog? And if not, why not? [2581]

Madam Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister has no responsibility for that. What a waste of a question to the Prime Minister.

Mr. Yeo: Will the Prime Minister confirm that if any of his Cabinet Ministers are found to have knowingly misled the House of Commons, that Minister will be expected to resign?

The Prime Minister: I have always made it clear that those Ministers who knowingly, deliberately or seriously mislead the House of Commons should not be in the Government. I have always made that clear and I make it clear again today. I hope that the values that this Government have undertaken to work with are somewhat different from those of the previous Government.

Q9. **Mr. Stevenson:** Is it not a scandal that thousands of our children and young people are being taught in dilapidated buildings? Is it not a fact that that is a direct result of a deliberate policy of chronic neglect by the Conservative party when it was in government? Will my right hon. Friend confirm that under this Government this completely unacceptable situation will be dealt with as a matter of priority? [2582]

The Prime Minister: I can confirm that. Of course it is important that we begin to put right the damage done over a period of years. The plain fact of the matter is that the previous Government were one of the very few Governments anywhere to preside over a situation where the proportion of national income spent on education fell, although the social security and welfare bills rose enormously. It is precisely for that reason that we do not see additional expenditure on education as enough in itself. It must be accompanied by measures that reduce the huge and appalling burden of social and economic failure that is the product of the past 18 years. It is both those things going together that allows us to get as much

money as possible into the areas of productive investment and to get us out of social failure. [HON. MEMBERS: "Where from?"] How about by reducing the numbers of young people on the dole? That is where from.

Mr. Clifton–Brown: Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that he spent three years answering questions in opposition—*[Laughter.]*—asking questions in opposition, slamming the previous Government's record on possible charges in the health service, and that he fought the recent election on the basis that the Conservative Government might introduce such charges, yet today cannot rule out prescription charges for pensioners or hotel charges for everybody else when they enter hospital? Is that not a betrayal?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman waits for the outcome of the review. I can tell him that we shall fight the next election on a platform of renewing and improving the national health service after 18 years of Conservative failure.

European Council (Amsterdam)

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): With permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a statement about the European Council in Amsterdam on 16 and 17 June, which I attended with my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Council conclusions have been placed in the Library and I will place a full copy of the text of the Amsterdam treaty there as soon as possible.

Our aims in the negotiations were to protect our essential interests over immigration, foreign policy, defence and a central role for Britain in Europe, to promote changes of real interest to the British people and to move Europe on to a new and positive agenda. We also promised to bring a fresh and constructive approach to Europe and to the negotiations.

I am happy to tell the House that those objectives have been fully achieved—and they were achieved while at the same time improving both our standing in Europe and our relationships with our European partners.

First, we have obtained legal security for our frontier controls, through a legally binding protocol to the treaty. That is an achievement of lasting value, attained for the first time. The key point in the protocol says:

"The United Kingdom shall be entitled . . . to exercise at its frontiers with other member states such controls on persons seeking to enter the United Kingdom as it may consider necessary for the purpose."

I know that that will be welcomed by the whole House. We have ensured that we, and only we, decide border policy, and that policies on immigration, asylum and visas are made in Britain, not in Brussels.

Others may choose to have different arrangements, to suit their traditions and geographical position. I see no reason for preventing them from doing so, although such arrangements will continue to be governed by unanimity. Under the treaty, the United Kingdom can also participate in areas of interest to us if we so choose, at our option. That is not an opt-out but an opt-in, as we choose.

In the justice and home affairs area, we have agreed better arrangements for co-operation on police matters, crime and drugs. I attach great importance to more effective international action in those areas of direct concern to people. However, such co-operation will remain intergovernmental and subject to unanimity. Thanks to amendments that we also secured, the European Court will have no authority to decide cases brought in United Kingdom courts on those issues.

We have also ensured continued protection for our essential interests in all the areas in which we sought it. We have maintained, as we said we would, the veto on matters of foreign policy, defence, treaty change, Community finances and tax.

We have prevented the extension of qualified majority voting in areas where it might cause damage. Others wanted to extend QMV in the social chapter, which would have affected our companies even if we had not been party to the chapter. Because we were in it, we were able to stop that. We agreed to QMV where it is in our national interests—for example, on research and development and on action to combat fraud and waste.

We have also ruled out other potentially damaging proposals. For example, others wanted to give the European Union explicit legal personality across all the pillars of the treaty. At our insistence, that was removed. Moreover, the treaty spells out that international agreements can be concluded only on the basis of unanimity following a clear Council decision. In addition, we secured a veto over flexibility arrangements which could otherwise have allowed the development of a hard core, excluding us against our will.

Second, for the first time in a decade Britain is setting a positive agenda for Europe. In April, I set out in Manchester our platform for reform: completion of the single market, a new emphasis on flexible labour markets and education and skills, reform of wasteful policies in agriculture and elsewhere, enlargement and a more effective common foreign and security policy. Each of those elements was fully reflected at Amsterdam, in the intergovernmental conference or the Council conclusions. In particular, we successfully promoted support for a new action plan for the single market that echoes key British concerns. That should, in time, lead to further opening of Europe's markets to British companies. Completing the single market will be one of the top priorities for the British presidency.

Third, we have put jobs at the top of Europe's agenda, where they belong. The new treaty chapter on employment recognises the importance of job creation and sets member states and the Community the task of promoting flexible labour markets, and education and skills. That is where Europe must make a difference.

Fourth, the treaty makes Europe more relevant to people: it ensures greater openness; it increases powers to combat fraud and waste; it strengthens environmental protection; it creates power to act against discrimination on grounds of sex, race, religion or disability; it gives subsidiarity—ensuring that decisions are taken at the European level only if there is real added value in doing so—real teeth through a binding protocol; and it imposes an obligation to take into account the welfare of animals.

Fifth, the treaty prepares the institutions of the Union for enlargement. Not as much progress was made on that as there might have been, but we have ensured that, at the time of enlargement, the Council's voting system will be changed to give Britain and other large countries more votes. Europe must now get on with making a reality of the historic opportunity of enlargement. We need to extend our stability and prosperity to the new democracies of central and eastern Europe. The European Council is committed to decisions on the opening of enlargement negotiations at its meeting in December. We shall play a leading role in those negotiations, particularly during our presidency.

Sixth, while retaining our veto, we have taken steps to improve the effectiveness of foreign policy co-operation with better planning and co-ordination. That is an important British interest, but getting Europe's voice heard more clearly in the world will not be achieved through merging the European Union and the Western European Union or developing an unrealistic common defence policy. We therefore resisted unacceptable proposals from others. Instead, we argued for—and won—the explicit recognition, written into the treaty for the first time, that NATO is the foundation of our and other allies' common defence.

The House will also be interested to know that the treaty contains provisions to strengthen Parliament's ability to scrutinise European legislation properly, by laying down a minimum six-week period for documents to be available.

We also made real progress in Amsterdam on the problem of quota hoppers—fishermen from other member states who fish against British quotas—even though it was not part of the IGC.

We secured an agreement with the Commission on our two central concerns. First, we are entitled to put into law a clear economic link between boats using our quotas and Britain. Economic benefits from boats flying the British flag should go to British ports, for example through a proviso that 50 per cent. of a boat's catch should be landed locally. We will, with all possible speed, introduce new licence conditions to reflect that. Second, the Commission agreed to bring forward new tougher measures of enforcement to ensure that fishermen landing their catch abroad cannot escape controls. Those measures are agreed by qualified majority voting and so cannot be blocked by another member state.

Taken together, those agreements will mean a major disincentive to quota hoppers, present and future. Commission agreement to the new measures means that their vulnerability to legal challenge—a perennial problem hitherto—should be greatly reduced.

The letters between myself and the President of the Commission setting out those agreements are in the Library. The Commission's letter also confirms that important principles underlying the common fisheries policy, notably relative stability and the provisions on 12-mile limits, should remain when they are reviewed in 2002.

Those commitments allow us to start working with fishermen from around the country to plan a sustainable future for the industry. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will make a more detailed statement immediately after this.

On economic and monetary union, the documents discussed by the House on 9 June were approved. I made it clear that the entry conditions should be strictly applied and that sustainable convergence is essential if monetary union is to go ahead successfully.

The European Council also agreed a resolution on employment, with British ideas at the centre of it. We have shown that, alongside low inflation and sound public finances, Europe needs a new approach to employment and growth, based on British ideas for competitiveness, introducing more flexible labour markets and employability. That means creating a more skilled and adaptable work force, better equipped to cope with economic change. It also means a new emphasis on getting people off welfare and into work. It does not mean the old agenda of tax and spend; no new money from the Community budget was agreed at Amsterdam. That is the right approach, in or out of monetary union.

The successful conclusion of the intergovernmental conference enables Europe to put institutional wrangles behind it and to move on to the issues that affect people's daily lives: jobs, the environment, crime. Progress in those areas will be our priority. We are determined not to let Europe get bogged down again in minutiae. If we are to build a people's Europe, we must stay focused on the people's concerns.

We said that we would secure our frontiers, and we did. We said that we would preserve NATO, not the European Union, as the cornerstone of the defence of Europe, and we did. We said that we would get a new deal for our fishing communities, and we did. We said that we would put jobs at the top of the agenda for Europe, and we did. We said that we would start to make Europe more relevant to the concerns of the peoples of Europe, and we did.

We made Britain's voice heard at Amsterdam, because, for the first time for many years, Britain spoke as a united Government with a clear direction for Europe. We have proved to the people of Britain that we can get a better deal by being constructive, and we have proved to Europe that Britain can be a leading player, setting a new agenda that faces the real challenges of the new century.

Mr. John Major (Huntingdon): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and for returning to the House speedily to deliver it.

In some areas, I can support the Prime Minister's statement, although in others the implications of what he has agreed have yet to be more fully set out than he has been able to set them out today. As the House will know, the documentation is extensive, and it is not yet fully available. I hope that the Prime Minister can confirm that the House will have the opportunity of a debate as soon as it has had a chance to study the implications of what he has negotiated.

Will the Prime Minister also confirm that the treaty as originally envisaged is not yet complete, and that large and important areas have not yet been decided and, indeed, were not mentioned in his statement? Can he tell us how many of the points that he has announced today will need legislation? As many of them are constitutional, can he confirm that those constitutional points will be debated here, on the Floor of the House, in due course when the legislation is introduced?

At the outset, let me probe what seems to have been agreed on NATO and on border control. On defence, the Prime Minister is entirely right to resist merging the European Union with the Western European Union, and he has our full and unqualified support for doing so; but may I check precisely what he has agreed to? Notwithstanding his assurances to the House, the draft treaty talks of

"the objective of gradual integration of the Western European Union into the European Union".

When and how is that to happen?

The Dutch presidency has said that

"for the first time Britain has conceded the principle of integrating defence in the European union".

Is that correct? Can the Prime Minister clarify the matter or explain why the presidency should have said that if it is not the case? How does that square with what the Prime Minister has been saying?

On border controls, is the Prime Minister aware that he has our complete and unqualified support in maintaining the control of this House over this country's national borders? There can be no question about that. Is it not a fact, however, that the agreement on border control was effectively achieved by last March, when our partners accepted that Britain would never give up border control? Can the Prime Minister confirm that the Dutch presidency made that clear then? If he cannot, I will hand him the quotes and the reports of the time which illustrate that that was indeed the case.

[Mr. John Major]

Is not the reality that this outcome—which is very welcome—was achieved by negotiations conducted by the last Government, and that what the Prime Minister has done is apply his usual jackdaw technique of picking up other people's property and claiming credit for it?

Can the Prime Minister also clarify the impact that Amsterdam has had on other elements of justice and home affairs? Is it not the case that the Government have an opt-out only on border controls? Where exactly do they stand on the new title on asylum and immigration that is proposed in the draft treaty? It is not clear from what the Prime Minister had to say. Could he tell me whether the European Court of Justice and the Commission's remit has been extended, as seems to have been done, to cover asylum and immigration? Is it not the case that the Council of Ministers, at a later date, will consider extending qualified majority voting to this area?

Could I ask the Prime Minister to outline the implications of the treaty for the European Court of Justice? Can he confirm to the House that he dropped the previous Government's proposals to reform the European Court of Justice although some of them had support from some of our European partners? Can he also confirm that he has achieved nothing to limit the damaging effect of retrospective application of European Court of Justice judgments?

On qualified majority voting, can the Prime Minister confirm in which areas he has given up the veto and explain how that will be of benefit to the House or the British nation? Can he also tell the House whether there are other areas where our veto has been bypassed or will be revisited at a later date?

The Prime Minister said that jobs were at the top of his agenda. Can he name any precise and practical measures that have been agreed at this summit that will create jobs other than for lawyers interpreting the treaty? Can he confirm that the social chapter will be integrated in the treaty, making a mockery of the claim to extend labour market flexibility? Can he also confirm that, utterly contrary to what he said in the general election campaign, this extends qualified majority voting to a wide range of new and important areas? What precisely has he agreed—an employment chapter with teeth that imposes costs and interferes, or an employment chapter with no teeth that raises expectations that it cannot meet?

Can the Prime Minister clarify what he has agreed on flexibility? He says that he has a veto, but can he indicate what agreement he has reached with his colleagues as to the areas in which he would permit this new flexibility to proceed by unanimity?

On common foreign policy where the Prime Minister's statement was particularly unclear, can he tell the House what is meant by common strategies? To what extent will decisions of the Council on common foreign and security policy be made by qualified majority voting? *[Interruption.]* Labour Members do not like these questions, but they should have been in the Prime Minister's statement and they were not.

Can the Prime Minister tell the House who will adjudicate on what is national policy and, therefore, to be decided by unanimity? On quota hopping, we look forward to the statement by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in a few moments, but the Prime Minister should know that the Spanish have already poured scorn on his claims to have solved quota hopping. He agreed in the election that it could be effectively dealt with only by treaty changes, but does not his agreement depend entirely on Commission good will and will not it seek to look after the interests of not just this country but Dutch, Spanish and other interests as well? Is not it the case that he made not the slightest attempt to push through the treaty changes that were the only way to guarantee help for British fishermen?

On enlargement, the Foreign Secretary extolled the virtues last week of a wider Europe, and we agree with him on that, but where is the progress on enlargement in the treaty? Where was the agreement over institutional reform, on the number of Commissioners, on voting weights? What practical measures will be taken to ensure that new countries are welcomed into the Community? Is it not a fact that this treaty does nothing whatever to help build the wider Europe that the Prime Minister says that he wishes to see and which I wish to see, but does help to create a deeper and more centrally integrated Europe?

Some of the right hon. Gentleman's agreements we can welcome; others suggest that this is both a botched and an incomplete negotiation that he is reporting to the House. It will certainly cause dismay in central and eastern Europe, as he should know. Much of what the Prime Minister has just won he inherited, and much of the rest was never at risk, as he knows. The Prime Minister has made a series of concessions to the European Union. He has gained nothing that was not readily available and he has done nothing whatever to widen the Community and much to ensure that it is deepened. He has missed the opportunities of the summit. What he has reported is not a triumph but a travesty.

The Prime Minister: Well, that was a good try anyway. I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman, in all sincerity, that on 9 June he made a speech in the House where he took the Labour Government to task for, he said, being about to sell out and give away a whole lot of things. Apart from issues such as the social chapter and employment chapter, where we are in genuine disagreement, I think that we have secured agreement on every single point that he made in that speech, as well as on certain things that he did not mention, such as legal personality, which he said we would never possibly get taken out of the treaty—and we did.

Anyway, if I may deal with the points that the right hon. Gentleman has made, of course the intergovernmental conference will require legislation. As for debating it on the Floor of the House, that will be discussed by the business managers in the normal way, but, of course, it will be properly debated. As for what he was saying about the WEU and EU and gradual integration, of course, the draft treaty text was precisely what was changed, so we now have a situation where there is no obligation to move into integration at all. That is the very thing that we managed to secure.

What is more, for the first time, we have secured a specific statement in the treaty that says that NATO for us is the foundation of our common defence. That is a huge step forward. It is what we never had before and we have now.

In relation to border controls, the right hon. Gentleman says that last March they had all got an agreement. I have to say that that is not our understanding of it. He was in

power for 18 years, during which time they did not secure that at any point—either under him or under the previous Prime Minister.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about asylum and immigration. We have no obligation to be in that at all, but what we have secured, which is important and a better way of going about things, is what I call an opt-in. We have the power within the treaty to go into any of these areas if we want to. If we do not want to, we need not, but if we do, no other country can block us going in. For example, the European Court of Justice role in Schengen, which he was talking about, does not affect us.

It is more sensible to realise that the rest of Europe has a genuine, different interest. In the rest of Europe, people want a uniform system of asylum, immigration and visa policy throughout the continent of Europe—and they want it, in many ways, to toughen their immigration and asylum policy. There are severe problems in many of the countries, not least Germany, because of the asylum and immigration policies that they have.

Our interest is different and there is no harm in recognising that there are different interests. The purpose of the protocol is to secure our legal frontiers, but to allow other countries, if they want to do things differently, to have another system, with our having the power to join them if we want to, but being under no obligation to do so.

In relation to QMV, we secured unanimity in all the areas where we wanted it, such as immigration. We made sure that the national veto was preserved in all the areas that we wanted, but, yes, there were some areas in which I agreed an extension of QMV—research, for example. It is important for this country that we have QMV in certain areas. It is a good thing for us, not a bad thing. Fraud is one such area. It is good that we have QMV in certain areas because we can then prevent smaller countries from blocking our interest.

The curious thing about the psychology of the Conservative party—which has become more curious today in this great new alliance, this meeting of minds—is that the greatest extension of QMV was agreed by the Conservative Government and that the very greatest extension was by Baroness Thatcher at the time of the Single European Act. That was the right thing to do. I do not say that as a point of criticism because if people can block measures opening up the single market, that is an inhibition on the effective working of the EU.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about the employment chapter. Incidentally, we secured a benefit from being part of the social chapter because there were moves by other countries to extend QMV to areas in social security and elsewhere that we did not want. If we were not part of it, they would have done it, and it would have been part of the social chapter. He would say, "Well, we had our opt-out", but experience teaches us that, in fact, these things still affect British companies operating on a European-wide basis. By being part of it, we were able to ensure that the social chapter was drafted sensibly.

On the employment chapter, heaven knows why the right hon. Gentleman's Government opposed that. It is a perfectly sensible measure. I do not know whether he was attacking it for being too prescriptive or for not being prescriptive enough. It provides the opportunity for measures to be taken, for example, to assist small businesses. That is a perfectly good thing. It sets the creation of jobs at the core of the employment chapter, in a way that is responsive to economic change. That is a big step forward for us and for our arguments.

In relation to flexibility, the right hon. Gentleman asked us to secure an emergency brake at Amsterdam, and we secured it. We are protected there, as we are protected in the common foreign and security policy.

The two final points relate to enlargement and to the common fisheries policy. On the latter, when we came to power there was not a single member state that supported the right hon. Gentleman's proposed treaty protocol. It was without any credibility and, incidentally, it would not have dealt with existing quota hoppers. We have secured not the Commission's good will, but its agreement and support for changing the licence conditions for vessels operating in this country, which will allow us to deal with both existing and future quota hoppers. Of course, that does not do everything that we would want to do—

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): The Spanish may go to court.

The Prime Minister: Yes, the Spaniards may take us to court—but, for the first time, we will have the Commission's support in defeating them. That is what is important. It is considerably better than tabling a protocol—[HON. MEMBERS: "Dream on!"] Hon. Members may say "Dream on", but the truth is that the protocol required the unanimous support of all other countries, but not one of them supported it.

On enlargement, the reform of the common agricultural policy and the single market are mentioned in the conclusions. I should like there to be more progress on the institutional mechanisms. We tried to secure that, but it was not possible. However, we shall continue trying to secure the very best deal possible for Britain and for the process of enlargement. We believe in enlargement. It is important and it is something which we owe the emerging democracies in the east of Europe.

I say to the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) that by playing a sensible and constructive role in Europe, we have a better chance of getting enlargement on our terms.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): In the Prime Minister's not unjustifiably long list of the Government's successes at Amsterdam, I was glad to note that he did not include something that was claimed by his spokesman and some of his Ministers—that the Government were responsible for the rescue of monetary union. The *Financial Times* has a quotation from Amsterdam:

"You could say we have rescued EMU"—

said a member of the Government; I wonder who that could be—

"although I would be grateful if you did not say it too loudly."

Perhaps I could say, not too loudly, that it is a little bizarre to claim to have rescued an organisation that the Government have not yet decided to join.

The right thing to say about the Amsterdam summit is that it was a modest achievement in the progress that needs to be made in Europe in tackling the challenges that lie ahead of it. Some have called the summit a failure—it was not, it was a disappointment. The Government are entitled to claim success in the things that the Prime

[Mr. Paddy Ashdown]

Minister listed and we welcome those successes, not least because they were aims that we, too, wanted to be achieved at Amsterdam.

However, there is an exception. I think that the Government misunderstand the process now in place for the integration of European defence and foreign policy. I do not think that the Prime Minister was right to say that NATO has not previously appeared in a treaty text in the way that he described. I note that the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), is nodding. If my memory is not wrong, NATO appeared quite explicitly in the Maastricht text, which said that nothing undertaken under the treaty should prejudice the importance of NATO. No one I know in Europe wants to get rid of NATO. However, building a second European pillar—which, over time, must mean the WEU being integrated into the European Union—will not undermine NATO; it will strengthen it.

That having been said, does the Prime Minister agree that the summit is marked not by the work it did, but by the work left to be done? Is it not true that there is a great deal of work to be done, perhaps at some future intergovernmental conference—surely there must be one—to prepare the way for enlargement and to complete the process of institutional change? Surely the right hon. Gentleman cannot be satisfied with the progress in, for example, the democratisation and accountability of the European institutions and in other areas that need to be dealt with before Europe can move forward. That is important, and I hope that the Prime Minister will agree.

We should dispose of the leftovers of the Maastricht treaty and move on to the new agenda of creating a people's Europe, which is less about the Europe of political elites and more about the Europe that delivers what people in Europe want. It is only through that that we can bind Europe's institution and move forward sensibly in the process of integration.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that. On the rescue of EMU, it is not for us to rescue it or otherwise. I thought that he was a great proponent of EMU—

Mr. Ashdown: I am.

The Prime Minister: Then he should be grateful to whoever said it.

The right hon. Gentleman said that it was a summit of disappointment, but that is not entirely correct. There was progress on jobs, crime and the environment. The summit was more a staging post on the way to try to reshape the European agenda, which is important. I echo what the right hon. Gentleman said about a people's Europe and I have said that myself.

On NATO and the arguments about an EU-WEU merger, I did not say that NATO had never been mentioned in the texts. It was mentioned, but the importance was that common defence and a common defence policy was actually contemplated in the Maastricht treaty that was negotiated by the previous Government. What we have done is put into the treaty words that indicate that we see our common defence as founded on and realised through NATO. That is an important difference, because it defines common defence in the perspective of NATO within the context of the treaty. It is important that we have secured that.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that there is a lot more to do, especially on enlargement. It is important to move that agenda forward and we are better placed as a country to play a proper role in that than we were before.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. The questions and answers from the two major Opposition party leaders have taken more than half an hour. I now seek one brisk question each from Members and I ask the Prime Minister also to make a brisk response. Otherwise, I will not be able to call many Members.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Will the Prime Minister give the House an assurance that if economic and monetary union proceeds and a single currency comes on to the agenda, there will be a free vote in the House on that matter, so that the decision is made by the people here and not by a political elite?

The Prime Minister: It is more than that. We have said that if the issue of monetary union comes on to the agenda in this Parliament, it will be a matter for a referendum of the British people. We do not know whether that will be the case or not. Our position—to retain the option to join if we wish, and we have already made our statements on that—remains as is and it will not alter.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Does the Prime Minister agree, however, that the summit was not a success on defence, because he has conceded—as the Dutch presidency has said—the principle that defence is now in the treaty in the sense that there is a common purpose and direction? In binding NATO in as a reference, the Prime Minister has provided an opportunity for others to build a common defence—albeit around NATO—that was not there before.

The Prime Minister: No, that is simply factually wrong. The first time the ideas of common defence and a common defence policy appeared in European treaties was when they were negotiated by the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). We are under no obligation, under the text that we have negotiated, to merge the EU and WEU. Indeed, as I have said, we have the right to have our common defence founded in NATO.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): Despite the mean-minded response of the previous Prime Minister, does not the successful outcome of the Amsterdam summit show that a constructive approach by Britain yields results for British interests in jobs, border controls, defence, crime and drugs, as well as providing a new hope and dynamism for Europe?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that and he is correct. It is in British interests to be part of Europe. If we are part of Europe, it is in British interests to be constructive and engaged. Of course, we must protect our national interests, and all countries do. The absurdity of the foreign policy of the previous

Government was that, in the end, the policy was directed at party and not at the interests of the country. That is what has to change.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): Will the Prime Minister accept that the exemption on border controls will be widely welcomed because—regardless of who negotiated what, when or how they were prompted—the issue has been fudged since the introduction of the Single European Act? Does he accept that hon. Members on both sides of the House wanted that exemption? Will he tell the House whether the European Court will now have jurisdiction over all European conventions—including, once it is ratified, the external frontiers convention?

The Prime Minister: None of those matters will apply to Britain unless we wish them to do so, and that is the advantage that we have gained. On preliminary rulings of the European Court of Justice, we secured changes to the text that will mean that other states will have to opt in if the European Court is to have jurisdiction. That change is another considerable advance.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the exemption on border controls; it is important that such an exemption is actually written into the treaty. If it had not been written in the treaty, there would have been a danger that, over time, our ability to control our own borders would be eliminated.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): While I welcome the Prime Minister's statement on employment and growth, he did not specifically mention completing the single market. Will he confirm that completing the single market will in itself create a fundamental attack on unemployment across the European Union?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. The previous Prime Minister asked me what the employment chapter will do. One of the important things that it has done is to signal a different approach. By placing right at the forefront the single market action plan, which has been championed by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and by placing action to make people more employable in a different labour market right at the heart of the test on jobs—rather than old-style interventionism, regulation and all the rest of it—we have sent the right message and signal on employment and growth.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The Prime Minister went to Amsterdam with the intention of extending QMV to environmental policy. As I understand it, that applies only under article 130s of the Maastricht treaty. Did he succeed?

The Prime Minister: We actually stopped it applying to taxation, thereby ensuring that we were completely protected on that matter. Ultimately, there were very few extensions of QMV, partly because of the considerations of states other than Britain. There were very few—

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): How many?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will see them.

The extensions are very minor, and I should like gently to try to persuade hon. Members of that. It was right for us to agree all the extensions of QMV that have been agreed. I will put the case higher and say that I was arguing for extension of QMV in matters such as research and combating fraud, because British interests are currently being blocked by one or two nations that are acting in a manner that is contrary to the interests of proper finance in either the European Union or the single market. I ask Conservative Members—in their current period of reflection and, perhaps, new spirit of coming together—to liberate themselves from some of the paranoia that gripped them while they were in government.

Mr. Charles Clarke (Norwich, South): Is the Prime Minister aware that there will be a welcome in the country for the priority that the Council presidency has given to employment and job creation in the employment chapter and the social chapter? Will he comment on the timing implications of that commitment to employment and jobs for EMU and the 1999 start date?

The Prime Minister: The truth of the matter is that we simply do not know whether that date will be achieved, although other countries are extremely anxious that it should be. What is important for Britain is to keep our own position very clear and unchanged, and to ensure—as we did when the issue arose in Amsterdam—that we get our principles right. Those principles are that there should be no weakening, fudging, botching or undermining of the Maastricht criteria, and, at the same time, to try to shift the focus of the debate in Europe to jobs and employment. Those principles should determine our approach.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): Subject to the detail on quota hopping, it seems that the arrangement that has been reached does not stop further quota hoppers joining the British fleet, does not expedite the removal of existing quota hoppers and, in any case, is temporary up to 2002. Does the Prime Minister agree with the recent suggestion by Mrs. Bonino that in the review of the common fisheries policy in 2002, even the issue of the renationalisation of the fishing industry could be considered? Would the Government consider that possibility?

The Prime Minister: I have not seen the remarks of Commissioner Bonino to which the right hon. Gentleman refers, but the agreement is not temporary. The revision of the CFP is to take place in 2002, but the agreement holds. In relation to stopping existing and future quota hoppers, the agreement does the most that can possibly be done, which is to give us the ability—or enhance our ability—to impose licence conditions on vessels fishing under our quotas. Obviously, the importance of that is that it discourages further quota hopping and also means that existing quota hoppers are considerably impeded.

In addition, I stress the importance of the Commission agreement to bring forward further enforcement measures. As I understand it, the problem of quota hopping is not merely the fact that people own our quotas but that those who come in from outside and own our quotas take a far bigger catch than they are supposed to, and there are no proper systems of inspection in the ports of nation states at which they land the fish. That is one of the things that we have to tighten.

[The Prime Minister]

I in no way pretend that the agreement solves the whole problem—that would be a foolish illusion and it would be wrong to suggest it—but it is a significant step of progress. It is now necessary to discuss with the fishing industry what changes are necessary to our licence conditions and then to try to make sure that we develop a forward strategy for the fishing industry so that it has a viable future and so that there is a genuine prospect of people securing their livelihoods in the long term.

Mr. Terry Davis (Birmingham, Hodge Hill): Will the Prime Minister confirm that although he is rightly opposed to a takeover of the WEU by the European Union and deserves to be congratulated by all parts of the House on his success in resisting that project, it does not mean that the Government are opposed to common defence? Indeed, the whole purpose of the WEU is common defence.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point—that is the purpose of the WEU and, indeed, of NATO. It is important that we do not determine one framework within which common defence is placed. My concern about the proposal to integrate the WEU into the European Union is that it suggests that everything goes through the EU. That is not the case. The debate at Amsterdam was not simply between integrationists and non-integrationists, but about the best way to make progress on common defence among countries that have a genuine co-operative interest. We very largely did that. It was not just about protecting our interests, although that was important, but about trying to suggest to the rest of Europe that there is a different way of looking at the matter.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): I know that the Prime Minister is aware of the importance to the British economy of the tourism and leisure industries. He will also be aware that they are, by their very nature, large employers of seasonal and part-time workers. What representations did he make on behalf of those industries to ensure that the application of the social chapter and the employment chapter does not cause them undue damage?

The Prime Minister: In relation to the social chapter, we made it absolutely clear that we do not favour an extension of qualified majority voting in respect of any measures that come up. Therefore, under the unanimity provisions, we can make a judgment as we wish.

In respect of the employment chapter, it is important that hon. Members understand that it specifically ruled out the harmonisation of laws. It is not about more regulation or harmonising the laws of member states but, in a sense, about trying to provoke a debate about the best way forward for economic reform in Europe. Of course the tourism and leisure industries are tremendously important, but they would benefit from an open single market in Europe and also from a prosperous Europe.

Miss Melanie Johnson (Welwyn Hatfield): What lessons does the Prime Minister draw from the fact that, although Margaret Thatcher said, "No, no, no" to Europe, she did not manage to succeed in getting legal protection for our frontiers?

The Prime Minister: What is important is that we say, "No" when it is sensible to do so, but that we do not spend our whole time saying, "No" as a matter of principle to everything that anyone else suggests. That means that we were able to achieve security for our border controls. That is important and I am pleased that we were able to do it.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): The Prime Minister—or at least his publicity machine—has been claiming victory on the issue of quota hopping, but the Spanish say that no deal has been reached and the Commission says that we are only at the outset of reaching a deal.

Will the Prime Minister confirm that current category A licences already contain the stipulation for a 50 per cent. landing and all that is changing is the enforcement? Can he guarantee that, as a result of the changes he has negotiated, the capacity reductions will fall on the flags of convenience fleet and not on domestic vessels? If he cannot give that guarantee, fishermen around the coastline will say that he may be claiming victory, but has been sold a haddie.

The Prime Minister: No, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. The latest information is that Spain was threatening to take Britain to the European Court as a result of the agreement, so, with all due respect, I think that he is wrong. We are able to strengthen the licence conditions and it is important that we do so; it is important also that we bring forward enforcement measures, but nobody can pretend that this subject will be easily dealt with or easily solved.

The hon. Gentleman says that we have been claiming some great victory, but we are not claiming victory at all. What we are claiming is that we have made progress. We have made progress, and that progress stands in sharp contrast to what went before. It is all very well for him, but he has no serious proposals of his own as to how to deal with the issue.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Irrespective of whether the 1999 start date is realistic, what discussions are taking place about the question of the accountability of a central bank to the European Parliament?

The Prime Minister: This was dealt with in the resolution of the Finance Ministers. It is something of which they are aware and it formed part of the discussion between France, Britain and other countries at the meeting of the Finance Ministers. That process of accountability is, of course, important and that discussion will continue, but what is absolutely essential is that nothing that was agreed at Amsterdam in any way changes the basic criteria. As I have said, whether or not those criteria can be met is another matter.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Has the Prime Minister considered exactly what the budgetary implications for the country and the Chancellor would be if the British Government were outvoted through an extension of qualified majority voting in research and development? By the same token, I understand that he has agreed to a massive extension of co-decision. Obviously, that is happy news for colleagues in another place, but can he explain to us today how he intends to guarantee the sovereignty of this House in those circumstances?

The Prime Minister: The European Parliament cannot actually propose anything that the Council has not agreed

to. What I announced in my statement was an enhanced way in which national parliaments, and this Parliament in particular, can study European documents. As for being outvoted through QMV on research and development, the problem is the opposite of that: it is that we will often want measures to be put through by the Commission using QMV—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question."] I am answering the question. The reason why it is important to have QMV in the area of research is that without it we can be blocked in what we want to do.

Obviously, if a large number of countries are opposed to what Britain is doing, we will not get our way, but the current problem is that, under unanimity, we can be blocked by one country. That is why I say that the sensible approach to QMV is to treat it on a case-by-case basis. Where it is not sensible to extend it, do not extend it; where it is sensible to extend it, do not take an ideological view that QMV in all circumstances is wrong.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is the Prime Minister aware that I do not measure success at these summits and common market conferences on the basis of further integration, which I regard as a sort of setback? I hope he will be able to please me as well as all the others who want that sort of advance among those 15 nation states. Will he answer this key question: as the single currency was the big issue among all the others, can he seriously tell me whether the momentum towards a single currency in those few days at Amsterdam was advanced or stalled? Please me.

The Prime Minister: I am habitually trying to please my hon. Friend, as he knows. The short answer is that it is impossible to tell, because in the end it will depend on whether countries meet the criteria. Matters would have been pushed forward in an unhelpful way if the criteria had been changed. We cannot tell what the outcome will be at the moment.

I can say, however, that I believe that the language on employment, jobs and growth was more realistic, and more what I would call people-centred, than most of the language that I have read in previous conclusions.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will the Prime Minister confirm that in Amsterdam he has agreed, under the resolution in annexe II to the presidency conclusions, that we will enter the exchange rate mechanism even if we do not sign up to EMU on 1 January 1999?

The Prime Minister: No, that is not correct.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his successful visit to Europe and on his negotiations? However, did he have discussions with Chancellor Kohl about the Eurofighter? As thousands of jobs in my constituency and many more thousands in Lancashire depend on that project, I hope that he did.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. I know how concerned he is about this matter on behalf of his constituents. I raised that issue with Chancellor Kohl in Bonn a short time ago and I was pleased that he confirmed that he still desires to proceed with the project. Apparently, budget discussions are going on in Germany at present, but I think it is very important that the project proceeds, for the defence of the country and for jobs and skills.

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling): Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House whether the new UK protocol maintaining the UK's borders applies with the same legal force to the nearly 400 million EU citizens as to those who are not EU citizens, given the new treaty wording to which he has subscribed—that

"the free movement of persons is assured"?

The Prime Minister: As I understand it, the position is that they have to produce their documents in the normal way, so that is something that has happened and will continue to happen.

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Clydesdale): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on his success in Amsterdam. I am especially grateful as, for the first time in 10 years, I shall be able to visit member states without having to apologise for my Government's intransigence. May I press the Prime Minister on enlargement and ask him whether there was any optimism on the future negotiations for the acceptance of Cyprus into the European Union?

The Prime Minister: No, that did not form part of the discussions. However, on enlargement, there was not as much progress as there should have been and, without doubt, we should have liked there to have been more, but there is still a considerable will to make progress. Some of the institutional methods of doing that are still open for debate, but the conclusions of the Amsterdam summit were very strong on the principle and issue of enlargement. I have made it clear that when we have the presidency of Europe we shall be making progress on that as one of our priorities. I believe that it is essential that we do so.

In response to the first thing that my hon. Friend said, I should say that I believe that, as a result of having a serious position on Europe, which means standing up for British interests whole-heartedly throughout but being serious, not intransigent, we shall get a better deal.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): The Prime Minister briefly mentioned subsidiarity. Does he agree that subsidiarity means decisions being taken not just at European member state level but at levels below that? How is that principle advanced by the new treaty? Will he confirm that the representatives of the small nations and regions of Europe will have an important part to play, following Amsterdam, in important matters such as the future of regional policy?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do agree. That is one of the very things subsidiarity is supposed to achieve. That is why we are strongly promoting the agreed protocol. It was made clear during discussions on it that subsidiarity means a far stronger role being played below member state level. That of course applies to the nations and regions of Europe—and below that level, too.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Can the Prime Minister confirm that the treaty now recognises explicitly

[Helen Jones]

the fact that European Union citizenship does not replace national citizenship—something which the previous Government signally failed to secure?

The Prime Minister: That is correct.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): The written conclusions to the summit contain pages of Euro-waffle about the need to create more jobs, including some damaging provisions, but they also press for flexible labour markets and lower business costs. How does the Prime Minister reconcile this new-found attachment to market forces with the fact that, at the same summit and in the same treaty, he is signing up this country to the provisions of the social chapter which, by definition, interfere in labour markets and raise business costs?

The Prime Minister: For the first time in the written conclusions to a summit, we got in straight terms the importance of concentrating on the very things on which we wish to concentrate: employment, growth, competitiveness, small businesses, and education and skills instead of old-style regulation.

The right hon. Gentleman says that lower business costs and flexibility are inconsistent with the social chapter. Basic minimum standards at work are not, in our view, inconsistent with economic prosperity. The social chapter, in relation to consultations with workers at a Europe-wide level and parental leave, is perfectly sensible.

I return to the point that I made earlier in response to the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major): as a result of being in the social chapter, we can play our part in shaping any legislation that may come from it. As a result of the Conservative Government's opt-out, the social chapter directive on consultation of workers on a Europe-wide basis came into force. We played no part in shaping it and had no influence over it, yet British companies ended up having to apply it. Half the British companies to which it would have applied, had we been part of the social chapter, ended up having to apply it voluntarily—but with no influence on the process. That is not a sensible way to proceed.

Mr. Bernie Grant (Tottenham): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on two counts. First, he has given us a clear and concise report, in stark contrast to the muddle and acrimony of the former Government. Secondly, he has nailed the lie that he is a poor negotiator—a lie put about by Conservatives during the election campaign. We now know that it was the previous Prime Minister, not my right hon. Friend, who was the poor negotiator.

On enlargement, will my right hon. Friend bear in mind the fact that our inner cities are suffering from unemployment and a lack of infrastructural development because of the previous Government? But enlargement will mean resources being drained away from the inner cities and poorer regions of Britain to the new countries. Can he assure us that he will consider that seriously in future negotiations?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to say that it is important to get enlargement on the correct terms. The purpose of enlarging is to draw into the EU the countries of eastern Europe. That is of mutual benefit—it is not simply a one-way process—because we will create a larger trading area. Enlargement should also be used as a lever to reform the common agricultural policy, which is currently a scandal.

It is because we understand the problems of unemployment in the inner cities that we are committed to taking action on it.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): To return to the issue of quota hopping, can the Prime Minister not grasp that west country fishermen do not want tinkering with the licence? They want quota hopping stopped. Is it not a fact that, as a result of the Prime Minister's inactivity at Amsterdam, we will not get rid of a single quota hopper, and British fishermen will not be able to catch one extra fish? West country fishermen were looking to the Prime Minister for an exercise in statesmanship. They found, instead, that he sold their industry down the river.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is factually wrong. The purpose of the agreement that we got is precisely to affect the activities of existing quota hoppers and of future quota hoppers as well. The key to that is the ability to change the licence conditions under which vessels operate.

The treaty protocol of the previous Government, which had not the slightest prospect of ever being negotiated, did not deal with the problem of existing quota hopping.

It is easy for the hon. Gentleman to get up and pretend to people that there is some easy answer in relation to quota hopping. There is not, and he should know that. People may get up and say, "I could have gone to Amsterdam and got the whole thing stopped overnight", but that is simply untrue. *[Interruption.]* It is said that it did not matter. That is unfair and wrong. It did matter, which is why it was a big part of our negotiation. It is most cruel and most deceiving to tell people that there is a simple solution, when one knows perfectly well that there is not.

Common Fisheries Policy

4.31 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Dr. John Cunningham): With permission, Madam Speaker, I will make a more detailed statement about the common fisheries policy and the agreement that the Prime Minister has concluded with the President of the Commission.

Fishing has an important place and a long tradition as an industry in this country. The Government intend to work with the industry to ensure its continued and sustainable future. That means devising a strategy to meet the challenges of low fish stocks and over-capacity.

We have inherited a series of profound problems as a result of the previous Administration's handling of fisheries policy, which lacked any sign of direction or support. One of their excuses for failure has been the problem of vessels owned largely by foreign interests which are United Kingdom-flagged and use UK fishing quotas. They give little or no economic benefit from their activities to our own fishing communities, because they are largely operated and crewed from other member states and land a high proportion of their catches outside the UK.

That is a long-standing problem, which the previous Administration allowed to develop and failed to solve. They could have addressed it in 1982, when the common fisheries policy was being negotiated, but they did not. Having failed to act then, they should have addressed the problem when enlargement to bring in Spain and Portugal was agreed in 1985.

However, the previous Government allowed matters to deteriorate and eventually last year proposed a draft treaty protocol which, it became clear, stood no realistic chance of success because they failed to secure support for it—nor is it clear that it would have dealt effectively with the existing situation. Not a single member state was willing to support the concept of a protocol proposed by the previous Administration.

In the weeks since 2 May, we have taken the matter up with the Commission and other member states. Our discussions included my talks with Commissioner Bonino on 20 May, and concluded in Amsterdam this week. The Government's efforts have now secured a constructive outcome.

In an exchange of letters between the Prime Minister and the President of the Commission, the Commission has set out measures that we can take, requiring UK-flagged vessels to demonstrate that their activities contribute substantial economic benefits for populations dependent on fishing and related industries in the UK.

The United Kingdom now has a basis for imposing on fishing vessels requirements that they comply with provisions to land a specified proportion of their catch—we envisage 50 per cent.—into UK ports, or have a majority of their crew resident in the UK, or commence a majority of their fishing trips from UK ports, or comply with a combination of measures. At present, many of these foreign-owned vessels contribute little or nothing to the economy of our fishing communities. The new rules would change this and ensure that benefits flow to our fishing communities and processors, by requiring the vessels to demonstrate that substantial economic benefits are secured.

We intend to introduce new licence rules to implement these measures as swiftly as possible. We shall be consulting the whole fishing industry about the new rules before asking the Commission to give a formal opinion on them. In this way, we can ensure that our rules are effective, sensitive to the interests of all affected by them, and consistent with the various legal requirements.

Without effective enforcement, all our efforts to ensure the conservation of fish stocks will be undermined. That is why the importance of enforcement has been the second major issue that we have pursued with the Commission. We have insisted that more must be done to ensure effective and consistent application of the rules. It is essential that, wherever fishermen land their catches, they must be subject to equivalent measures. The Commission is committed now to examining improvements in enforcement, including strengthened obligations on member states. It will also look at the role of Commission inspectors. They will report later this year to the Council with proposals as necessary.

Meanwhile, we are taking steps ourselves to tighten various aspects of enforcement. I will announce these in a separate written statement to the House. They concern action to assist the Marine Safety Agency in ensuring that vessels and their crews are properly certified to comply with safety requirements and, in addition, steps to prevent evading quota rules and undermining conservation objectives by discarding fish already stowed on board.

We have also obtained from the Commission assurances about the involvement of local fishing interests in the decision-making process, and about the review of and prospects for the common fisheries policy after 2002. The Commission has confirmed that key elements of the common fisheries policy are widely valued and that it considers it unlikely that the fundamental principle of relative stability would be called into question or that there would be a desire to modify present restrictions on access to waters inside member states' 12-mile limits. We will be building on those assurances during future discussions about the common fisheries policy.

In total, I consider that this is a valuable outcome. We have secured some very positive results concerning the application of economic links, as well as making constructive progress on a range of wider issues, all of which are central to the Government's approach to the common fisheries policy. Because we have agreed a way forward with the Commission, we are in a much better position to avoid legal challenge to the measures we adopt. Measures proposed by the Commission to the Fisheries Council would be agreed by qualified majority voting.

There is much more to be done to put our fishing industry on a sound footing for the future. I now propose to take this action forward urgently. With my colleagues responsible for fisheries in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, I am inviting the leaders of the UK fishing industry to participate in high-level talks on the industry's future. The highest priority is to decide the way in which we implement rules to require the economic link. However, there is a much wider agenda. We must address the problems of enforcement, low stocks and over-capacity, as well as looking at other possibilities for change in quota and licence management and the scope for more regional involvement.

[Dr. John Cunningham]

The Government want to develop a realistic strategy to create a viable future for our fishing industry in the years ahead. These talks will start that process. We shall ensure that the industry is directly and fully involved.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new post, and wish him well.

Outside the House, the Prime Minister's press secretary is claiming the proposals as a victory. It was interesting to note that not even the Prime Minister had the gall to claim them as such; rather, he spoke simply about making progress.

How can an exchange of letters between the United Kingdom Government and the Commission be binding on anyone else? What possible status in Community law does such an exchange of letters have? What is even more curious is that the Minister said that he would be consulting the fishing industry about the new rules before asking the Commission for a formal opinion on them. What is in those letters? *[Interruption.]* Perhaps they can be put in the Library so that we can all read them.

How can such measures be binding on the Spanish and others? Given the Factortame judgment, any such proposals will almost certainly be struck down by the European Court of Justice. *[Interruption.]* It is little wonder that the Spanish Government have poured scorn on those proposals, as meaningless and devoid of effect. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) keeps interrupting from a sedentary position, but I suspect that he will find it difficult to convince fishermen in Scotland that the outcome is anything other than a sell-out.

During the general election campaign, the Prime Minister agreed, as did everyone else, that quota hoppers could be effectively dealt with only by treaty changes. Indeed, the Prime Minister went further than that during the campaign, when he said at the time of the Luxembourg Fisheries Council that a Labour Government "would not rule out"—

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Baldry: The right hon. Gentleman said that the Labour Government "would not rule out"—I challenge the Parliamentary Secretary to look up that quote—the Government using their veto at the Amsterdam summit to ensure that quota hoppers were dealt with through treaty changes.

In reality, the Government have made no attempt whatever to get treaty changes. That is a complete sell-out of the United Kingdom's fishing industry. The current proposals will not get rid of a single existing quota hopper; nor will they prevent the transfer of United Kingdom fishing licences to quota hoppers in the future. If there are to be national fishing quotas, it must be right that United Kingdom fish should be for United Kingdom fishermen. The agreement, however, does not give our fishermen one extra fish.

It is also clear from the right hon. Gentleman's statement that the Government have failed to defend the concept of relative stability. They have also failed to make it clear that our 12-mile fishing limits are non-negotiable.

Does not the right hon. Gentleman appreciate that the fishermen of the United Kingdom will be appalled and angry at how they have been so comprehensively sold out and betrayed by the Government? This is a black day for those fishermen—a day when their interests were thrown away for a meaningless piece of paper and a cheap soundbite.

Dr. Cunningham: That long, boring and rather convoluted response barely merits a reply, but I shall deal with at least some of the points that the hon. Gentleman raised.

The hon. Gentleman seems to be saying that some progress is not as good as no progress. For 18 years, the Conservative Government made no progress, but, as the Prime Minister has said, we have made some reasonable progress.

Let us consider the hon. Gentleman's repeated reference to a change to the protocol. Not a single member state was willing to vote for the protocol. In any event, it would not have dealt with the existing problem. That is the reality. The hon. Gentleman kept on referring to the protocol, but it was a complete fraud committed on British fishermen. He knows that to be the case.

The Commission letter will be binding. The hon. Gentleman asked why we are consulting. We are consulting our own fishermen exactly because the new rules will apply to them, too. In case the hon. Gentleman is not aware of it, although I am sure that he is, plenty of our vessels land their catch at foreign ports. That is the reality, so we must consult our fishermen before changing the rules because they will be directly affected by them.

The hon. Gentleman said that he would like to see the exchange of letters. They have been in the Library since about noon today. They have been available.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): We had to ask the Library for a photocopy just before 3 o'clock.

Dr. Cunningham: The hon. Lady intervenes from a sedentary position, and I should like to put it on the record that I sent in advance a copy of my statement to the leader or the spokesperson of every party in the House. Every party had a copy of my statement in advance of my making it. I have nothing to hide in making my statement.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) mentioned the consequences of the Factortame case. That case results from a bungled attempt by the previous Government to do something about these matters. The Government are now facing, as a result of the previous Government's bungling, 97 claims for compensation in the courts. That is the result of the previous Administration's incompetence.

The changes that I am announcing will affect both existing and future sales of British quota. The hon. Member for Banbury refers to the problem as if it is in some way the responsibility of the Spanish or Netherlands fishermen. What actually happened? Given the abysmal economic circumstances of the UK fishing industries, fishermen were forced out of business, and they willingly sold their quota to foreign owners. All that happened in three separate phases under the previous Government's administration. If we are apportioning blame today, it lies fairly and squarely with the previous Government's failed fisheries policies.

There may be an attempt to challenge the new rules. I would not be surprised if that were to happen—I do not suppose that anybody in the House would be surprised. The fact, however, that we shall agree the detailed changes and implementation with the Commission gives us added strength in our ability to resist any such challenge.

The hon. Member for Banbury finished with a sort of rhetorical flourish in saying that what I have announced would not be welcome to British fishermen and fishing communities. The reality is that we have made some significant progress in seven weeks in office, while the Conservative Government made none in 17 years.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware that we entered the Community without any agreement on fishing? The Conservative party, when in government under the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), did nothing to defend the distant water, middle water fleet or inshore fleets. When some of us tried to move the Adjournment of the House on that issue—that we should not go into the Community until the matter was settled—we were rebuffed by the Government of the day. That should be made extremely clear.

Since then, every Government have been seeking to improve the position of our fishermen. However, they have been playing from a hand that has held very few trumps, because the situation was lost at the outset. Therefore, my right hon. Friend is to be congratulated on such progress as has been made so far. It is showing an ability to try to negotiate with the Commission and eventually with our Community partners to try to bring at least some hope for the British fishing fleet.

As for the letters with the Commission, surely it would not be right to say that they are legally binding on it. They are merely a statement of intent on the part of the Commission, and any regulations that are made will be subject always to challenge in the European Court. On that basis, will my right hon. Friend seek to ensure that, in negotiating the new regulations, he bears in mind our fishing fleet and the fleets of other countries that also land in ports other than their home ports, so that we can get as many as possible of our partners in the Community behind us in pushing forward a new policy?

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He is right to say that the problem stems from the complete neglect of the UK fishing industry at the time of our entry into the European Community in 1972, and has flowed on from there. It is—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Banbury is mumbling on from the other side of the Dispatch Box. He had every opportunity to make some progress—his party and he himself—and they failed to do so.

First, the Commission is the guardian of the treaty and of European Union law. It will be in the interests of the Commission, and in this instance the President of the Commission, to ensure that the final details of licences that we shall discuss with our fishermen will be enforced.

Secondly, my hon. Friend's constituents—he represents one of the most important fishing communities anywhere in the UK—can be assured that we shall properly consult them about these changes and about the policy developments that we want to make about the future of their industry, so that they can have a secure and sustainable future.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): I acknowledge that the Minister's inheritance in fisheries policy, as in quite a number of other policy areas within his remit, is a sorry one—a fact eloquently underscored by the response by the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), the Conservative party spokesman, to the right hon. Gentleman's statement. None the less, will the Minister acknowledge that, perhaps inescapably at this stage in the discussions, his statement almost raises more questions than it can provide immediate answers?

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that quota hopping, devilish though it is, is a symptom of the deeper problem—the common fisheries policy itself? Will he therefore commit himself and the new Administration to a fundamental reform of the CFP, with the specific aim, based on the intention behind the discussions that he has outlined, of establishing proper regional management of fisheries, which must be more sane and sensible for the long-term viability of the domestic sector of our industry?

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I congratulate him on his question, which made far more sense and was far more constructive and realistic than what was said on behalf of the Conservative party. He is right to say that the inheritance is a sorry one, and I am pleased that he recognises that fact. He is also right to say that there are many more questions to which we must find answers. I share his opinion that the sale of United Kingdom quota was a symptom and a consequence of the neglect of our fishing industry. It is not the root of the problem, but we still want to act as quickly as we can in trying to mitigate it.

I share the hon. Gentleman's medium-term objective of reform of the common fisheries policy. We have already had preliminary discussions on that subject, as the Prime Minister and I have both confirmed. Better involvement of fishermen and fishing communities in the future of their industry is one of our primary objectives. I share the hon. Gentleman's attachment to that idea as part of the way forward. Regional management of our fisheries makes sense not only from the point of view of the people in those communities but from that of Ministers, too.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I appeal to all hon. Members, as well as to the Minister, for short questions and short answers. We have not yet even reached the Orders of the Day, and I have the rest of the business of the House to safeguard.

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his succession to this bed not of nails but of dogfish and cattle teeth. I congratulate him, too, on doing more about the quota hoppers in his short period in office than the previous Government did in 18 years. None the less, the industry is very dissatisfied with a settlement that will make life more difficult for Grimsby vessels, many of which land overseas to a considerable extent, yet which does not close the door to future quota hoppers.

[Mr. Austin Mitchell]

Quota hoppers still constitute 26 per cent. of the British fleet, so, when the time comes to assess our targets for effort limitation, an almost impossible cut in the British fleet will be required if we are to gain access to the European funding that the industry desperately needs, and that competing industries have already had.

Finally, because there is a ridiculously mixed system of capacity and effort limitation under multi-annual guidance programme IV, can the Minister tell us that he does not envisage any kind of limitation on days at sea, such as the previous Government failed to impose on the industry?

Dr. Cunningham: I can assure my hon. Friend that Grimsby fishermen and others sailing from that port will have every opportunity to add to his already formidable representation of their interests. As for conservation and the requirement for reduced effort, when the measures emerge they will affect all licence holders, not only those based in the United Kingdom. I cannot lawfully impose all such reductions on overseas vessels holding United Kingdom licences. I simply would not be allowed to do so.

With regard to MAGP IV, we have discovered that part of this miserable legacy is the previous Administration's failure to meet many of the requirements of MAGP III, so we have inherited a huge backlog of work on conservation measures.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment. I have known him for tens of years and I have never seen him as a Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, but none the less I wish him well, because, unless he does well, British agriculture and British fishing will suffer.

Will he overcome my concern that there is nothing in the statement about many of the most interesting and smaller communities of inshore fishermen, such as Seaton, Beer and Sidmouth in my constituency? Many small communities rely on the work of their men. No consideration has been given to many of their concerns—which I do not need to outline, because the right hon. Gentleman will know about them—either in the statement or in the negotiations.

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his kindness. I never saw myself as Minister of Agriculture, either, but I am enjoying the responsibilities, and am looking forward to playing an important role in my right hon. Friend's Government.

The right hon. Gentleman says that we have given no consideration to small fishing communities. I am pleased to tell him that that is not true. I represent a small fishing community in the port of Whitehaven, so I am keenly aware of the points that he legitimately makes on behalf of smaller fishing communities. When we review the common fisheries policy, it will be important to such smaller communities that we seek some stability, especially the maintenance of the control of the 12-mile limit. We want to make it clear that many of the changes that we shall be required to implement under MAGP III and MAGP IV will not affect the smallest vessels.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): In his further talks with the Commission, will my right hon. Friend build on the Commission's interest, which I was pleased to hear him mention, in regional involvement in decision making? That would be welcome in the south-west, where conservation measures have often been inappropriate to the mixed fish stocks there, and would play an important part in the development of solutions for conservation.

Dr. Cunningham: I accept my hon. Friend's point. As I have said several times already, we intend to make significant changes to improve regional involvement of fishing communities in the policy development that is so important to their health and well-being.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Will the Minister confirm, perhaps for the benefit of the Prime Minister, that category A fishing licences—I have one here—already contain the stipulation that 50 per cent. of catches should be landed at domestic ports? If it is a question of implementation, how is transhipment to be dealt with? For example, are fish that are landed at the port of Buckie in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) and taken straight to Spain counted as part of a domestically landed catch?

Am I right in believing that more than 90 per cent. of the crews of flags-of-convenience vessels do not have Marine Safety Agency certification? If so, are they not fishing illegally, and should not the same restraint be used on them as would be used on the crews of boats in my constituency or that of my hon. Friend the Member for Moray, or on any domestic fishermen who did not have MSA certification?

Dr. Cunningham: I can confirm that, under existing licence rules, vessels that land less than 50 per cent. of a catch in the United Kingdom are required to visit UK ports at least four times in six months for inspection. That is a weak control. We propose a more effective control, which will give us more economic benefit than the existing provisions. The hon. Gentleman is partly, but not wholly, right.

As for enforcement, we should be candid with ourselves and recognise that enforcement measures have not been as effective as they might have been in respect of our own, let alone overseas, fishing effort. That is why the second most important part of what I have been saying, and what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been saying, is that we must toughen up enforcement, and have uniform application of enforcement throughout the European Union. I do not want rules to apply to United Kingdom fishermen and their vessels that are not universally applied. We will continue to press that.

A number of vessels have been heavily fined for breaking the existing regulations. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall be even tougher in the future in enforcing the rules.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): My right hon. Friend is right to condemn previous Tory Administrations. It was the Tory Government led by the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) who sold the pass, and others have continued down that sad road. I speak as a member of a fisherman's family.

Apart from the serious problem of quota hopping, there is another problem that I consider equally serious: industrial fishing. Will my right hon. Friend do something

about the need to reduce, if not abolish, that wasteful practice? In Scottish waters, the Wee Bankie and the Buckie Man's bank should be protected from the onslaught on the sand eel by Danish fishermen.

Dr. Cunningham: As my hon. Friend says, the problem of the sale of the UK quota—which is what we are discussing—is one of a number of important and difficult problems. It is not—I am candid about this—a problem which will be easily or quickly resolved. People have legally acquired the quota: these were willing sales and legal purchases. No protocol on earth would have obliged those people to give up what they had legally acquired.

As for conservation and closing some areas, the Parliamentary Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley), is looking into that in some detail. We would not flinch from taking strong action if we concluded that that was the best way in which to improve conservation and prevent the fishing out of our important fisheries. Most sensible fishermen recognise that, if there are no fish, there is no future for them and their industry.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): I represent the second largest fishing community in England and Wales, in Brixham. I am anxious to tell the Brixham fishermen exactly what the statement means for them.

Can the Minister tell us whether one extra fish will come to British fishermen as a result of the deal? If no more fish will come to them, will one boat under a flag of convenience come to the British fishing fleet? If that does not happen, will the British quota come back to Britain—even one fish of it?

If that does not happen, what will become of 50 per cent. of the fish that are landed on the Brixham dock? Will they have to be driven all the way to Holland and Spain—which would pollute the environment, and make the fish that arrived three or four days later not fresh for the people of those countries? What is the advantage of the deal to the Brixham community?

Dr. Cunningham: I am not sure what the advantage of the hon. Gentleman's intervention was to the Brixham community.

The advantage is that, for the first time, we have made some progress. We are not making over-the-top claims for progress on resolving the problem of the sale of the UK quota, which took place when the hon. Gentleman was sitting on the Government Benches behind his right hon. and hon. Friends the Ministers. I did not hear him say too much about it while it was going on.

We are making some progress, which means that more fish will be landed in Britain. The protocol to which the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends gave so much credence would have had no impact on the existing situation—even if it had obtained some support from other member states, which it signally failed to do. If the hon. Gentleman wants to help Brixham fishermen and their communities—and I understand that he would naturally want to do that—he can tell them that this is the first significant step towards regaining some economic benefit for them, following what has happened to fishing in Britain over the past 17 years.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Inevitably, part of the problem lies with British fishermen who have sold their quotas. Much of the solution to the problem of fish conservation lies in the hands of fishermen. What are the Minister's plans for seeking talks or involving fishermen in an attempt to find solutions to the problems that face their industry?

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is absolutely right. In the context of quota selling, it must be said that the economic circumstances in fishing communities and the neglect of the fishing industry drove many fishermen, in some desperation, to sell their quotas, at a time when the previous Government were taking no notice of their problems—indeed, in some respects they were making them worse.

I assure my hon. Friend that we shall involve fishermen and fishing communities from the outset in the development of new policies to produce a sustainable industry. It would be absurd for the United Kingdom, as a maritime nation, not to have a sustainable fishing industry. We are determined to secure that, and that means taking some tough decisions on conservation, which is all the more reason for us wanting to engage fishermen from the outset. That is why we shall call them to a meeting as soon as possible.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): Can the Minister say how long he expects the consultation process to go on? Can he guarantee that, when the proposals go to the Commission, they will be accepted? Will we get to the position where we are with beef, so that amendments will be sought, time will go on and on, and little advantage will be gained?

Dr. Cunningham: The consultation process will take, I hope, a relatively short period in respect of the licence conditions that I have mentioned. Of course, engaging in talks with fishermen about the future of the industry so that it is viable and sustainable will take considerably longer.

The hon. Gentleman asks about proposals going to the Commission. My right hon. Friend has secured in the letter from the President of the Commission a commitment to those licence changes. I do not think that there is a prospect of the President of the Commission wanting to see that to which he has committed himself in that letter frittered away.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend on his announcement. Only last week, I made my maiden speech and urged the Government to include quota hopping in their discussions on Europe. Therefore, I am pleased that today we have the proofs of those discussions. My constituents will be pleased that fishing is at long last at the forefront of Government policy. For many years, it was ignored or pushed behind other issues that were seen as more important. I represent an area that was once—

Hon. Members: Question.

Madam Speaker: Order. I will deal with this. The hon. Lady is a new Member. Let us have a little tolerance. Time is passing, and I asked for quick questions and quick

[Madam Speaker]

answers, but I have not had any response yet. I should like to have it now. I ask the hon. Lady to put a question to the Minister.

Mrs. Humble: I do apologise.

Madam Speaker: We all know her constituency very well, and we like it.

Mrs. Humble: The question that I shall be asked when I go back and talk to Fleetwood fishermen will be about the nature of the consultation. They will be pleased that there is to be consultation, but they and I would like more details about its nature and its timetable.

Dr. Cunningham: I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) in the House. For that matter, I am delighted to see all my hon. Friends who represent fishing ports. It shows that all the bluff and bluster by the Conservative Government did not save the necks of many Conservative Members who represented fishing communities.

I shall write to my hon. Friend about the consultation process, and give her the assurance that her constituents in Fleetwood will have every opportunity to put their views to me and my colleagues.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge–Brownhills): Although I think that the House supports the Minister in his admirable objective of trying to safeguard coastal and fishing communities and to conserve our fishing stocks and the integrity of our economic zone, is not, in truth, the real trouble that fishing is a European Union competence—that is where the trouble lies? If the Minister were accountable and responsible within our domain, we would have a more effective fishing and conservation policy. In their discussions, will he and his right hon. Friend consider how and why—in what way—a European Union competence over our fisheries and our economic zone is in our national interest?

Dr. Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman is really asking whether it is in Britain's interest to be a member of the EU. So long as we are a member of the EU, we are bound by the provisions of the common fisheries policy and, whether he likes it or not—whether I like it or not—we have to work within the confines of that policy. It is all the more important, therefore, that we do have a constructive, positive approach to EU membership. It is no accident that the new Labour Government's change in approach to dealing with our problems in the EU is showing some results, where none flowed from the belligerent, loud-mouthed and aggressive attitude of the previous Administration.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): On behalf of the fishing communities of Scarborough and Whitby, it is important that we have broken the deadlock on this whole issue. The reason I am here to represent those communities is that the Conservative party failed to deliver the consultation that it long promised, and its many other promises to fishing communities in Scarborough and Whitby. I should like know in some detail what my right hon. Friend the Minister proposes to do about regional initiatives to ensure that we conserve fishing stock, and about taking a more global approach to ensure that we achieve regional solutions to regional problems. After all, fish do not know any boundaries.

Dr. Cunningham: My hon. Friend has the distinction of representing two fishing ports; most of us are lucky to represent one. I cannot give him the detail now about how we intend to develop our thinking on regional involvement. It is exactly for that reason that we want to begin talks with fishing community representatives. There would be little point in having talks if I were going there simply to impose on them a blueprint that we had already decided; but, again, I assure him that his constituents in Scarborough and Whitby will have every opportunity to be involved in those discussions.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): What will happen if the Minister imposes regulations in the licence in accordance with the letters that have been exchanged, the case is then taken to the European Court, and his new licences are found to be in contravention of the treaty in the judgment of the European Court? What steps will the Government then take?

Dr. Cunningham: All that is hypothetical.

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, Central): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, which will mean genuine progress in the fishing industry. I particularly welcome his announcement that he intends to hold a fishing summit. In Aberdeen, we recognise that the fishing industry is made up not just of the fish-catching side. Many thousands of jobs depend, for example, on the fish processing and merchant side of the business, and of course there is the consumer angle. Therefore, when he pulls together his summit, will he take those interests into consideration, and include them in his discussions?

Dr. Cunningham: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): The Minister's statement referred to a number of requirements: 50 per cent. of catch should be landed at UK ports, a majority of the crew should be resident in the UK and a majority of fishing trips should start from the UK port. They are all linked by the word "or". Is it one out of three or two out of three, or is that the sort of matter that he will be discussing?

Dr. Cunningham: It can be a combination of all three in part. That is a matter for discussion in terms of the conditions that we shall apply to the licences.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Is not the truly remarkable thing about quota hopping the fact that, of all the European countries, the only fleet that has suffered significantly is Britain's? When I ask fishermen in Lowestoft, "Why don't you hop on another country's quota," they say, "You just try. You can't do that."

Therefore, is not the real significance of today's announcement the fact that, for the first time, we have a Government who have achieved something that will not only discourage future quota hopping by bringing in the

economic link, but deal with the existing situation? Is it not a fact that more fish will therefore be landed in British ports, which is good for British fish markets, and more British fishermen will be able to be employed on the boats, where previously they were denied access?

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and delighted to see him here, as I played a small part in his campaign. He is absolutely right, of course. The reason why our fishermen cannot buy quota in other countries is simply that it is not for sale: other Governments have ensured that the economic circumstances of their fishing industries make it profitable and secure for their fishermen to hold on to their quota. The previous Government failed to do that in this country, which led to the sale of quota and caused the problem in the first place.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I feel sure that the right hon. Gentleman recognises that the announcement is more of a sprat than a prize fish. I know that, throughout the fishing industry, there will be deep disappointment that it does not deal with the fundamental issues. However, I feel sure that he also shares my concern that the fishing industry and fishermen in particular have, over the past year, perhaps been used by certain people of a more xenophobic—

Madam Speaker: Order. I am listening very carefully, but I have not yet heard a question.

Mr. George: The question is coming.

Madam Speaker: Good. Let us have it now.

Mr. George: In the measures proposed here, there are difficulties, in that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) pointed out, if it is a question of either/or in relation to the crewing requirement—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat for a moment. I have asked for a question. I am very tolerant with new Members, as I was with the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble). I explained to the House that this is Question Time, and questions must be put to the Minister. I am now waiting for the hon. Gentleman's question.

Mr. George: Given the fact that there are difficulties, does the Minister agree that, under the crewing arrangements, it is possible for the crew of quota hoppers simply to use postal addresses in the United Kingdom? It is not possible to impose nationality criteria in relation to crewing arrangements.

Dr. Cunningham: In the part of the world that I was born and grew up in, we were told that, when the boat comes in, little fish are sweet, so I agree that this is by no means the end of the problems faced by the fishing industry and our fishing communities. This is the beginning of a strategy to tackle those deep-seated and long-established problems. The conditions that we shall apply to the licences will meet one of those criteria or a combination of one or more of them, so long as we are satisfied that the resulting economic benefit to the communities concerned is real and can be sustained.

Mr. Calum Macdonald (Western Isles): Given the fact that we got into this mess under the Tories in the first place because they allowed free trade in licences and quotas, will the Minister consider reviewing the whole system of selling quotas and licences to the highest bidder as part of his review of local and regional fisheries management?

Dr. Cunningham: In a single market, I cannot stop people willingly and lawfully selling something that is theirs; that is the reality. We want to achieve circumstances in our fishing communities and fishing industries that make it attractive not to sell quota, but to retain it in those communities because they will obtain significant economic benefit from it.

The economic conditions that prevailed in the communities led to the sale of quota. We hope that, through the changes we shall make and through the development of a strategy for our fishing industries, we will minimise—I will not say eliminate—the sale of quota.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Is not the hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) correct to suggest that the key to the problem is the clash between the concept of having quotas and the free market in Europe, which causes a problem with the common fisheries policy?

I want to press the Minister on the legality of what he has agreed. Is not the reality that the Spaniards are pleased because they know that there is no legal binding framework that is justiciable in front of the European Court of Justice? What does he plan to do to rectify that?

Dr. Cunningham: Depending on what newspaper one reads or what broadcast one listens to, our Spanish colleagues are either pleased or hopping mad. Both reports cannot be true. I am satisfied that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has concluded sensible, practical steps forward to deal with the problems. Those steps should be welcomed for what they are—reasonable progress in the circumstances. They give us an opportunity to build upon that progress. I want fishing communities and fishermen throughout the United Kingdom to play a part, with my ministerial colleagues and myself, in building on those important first steps.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The Minister rightly said that enforcement is the key. My concern is that, until recently, there were no inspectors in Spain.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) made a key point: until we have an agreement that is part of the treaty—I understand that this agreement is not—it simply cannot stand up in the European Court of Justice. As my hon. Friend said, our fishermen do not have justiciable rights to rely on before the European Court or, indeed, any court in this country.

Dr. Cunningham: What the hon. Lady says is not true. The requirement to land 50 per cent. of catch already applies in Denmark. That has not been challenged in the European Court. I cannot rule out legal challenges, but I am confident that we can develop licence conditions—and get the agreement and support of the Commission—that we can sustain. That is our objective. The agreement achieved by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in Amsterdam will give us the opportunity to secure that.

BILLS PRESENTED

Wild Mammals (Hunting with Dogs)

Mr. Michael Foster, supported by Mr. Roger Gale, Mr. Kevin McNamara, Mr. Simon Hughes, Angela Smith, Sir Teddy Taylor, Mr. Ivor Caplin, Mrs. Jackie Ballard, Ms Jackie Lawrence, Mr. Nigel Jones, Mrs. Margaret Ewing and Mr. Ian Cawsey, presented a Bill to make provision for the protection of wild mammals from being pursued, killed or injured by the use of dogs; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 28 November, and to be printed [Bill 7].

Mental Health (Amendment)

Dr. Julian Lewis, supported by Mrs. Gillian Shephard, Mr. Simon Hughes, Mr. Kevin McNamara, Mrs. Angela Browning, Mr. Charles Kennedy, Mr. Donald Anderson, Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. David Marshall, Mr. Iain Duncan Smith, Mr. Chris Mullin and Mr. John Bercow, presented a Bill to amend the Mental Health Act 1983 to provide greater access to hospital accommodation for mentally ill people; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 12 December, and to be printed [Bill 8].

Referendum (English Parliament)

Mrs. Teresa Gorman, supported by Mr. Christopher Gill, Mr. Richard Shepherd, Mr. David Amess, Mrs. Ann Winterton, Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John Hayes and Mr. Peter Luff, presented a Bill to make provision for the holding of a referendum in England on the establishment and tax-varying powers of an English Parliament: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 16 January, and to be printed [Bill 9].

Private Hire Vehicles (London)

Sir George Young, supported by Sir Sydney Chapman, Mr. Alan Clark, Ms Margaret Hodge, Miss Kate Hoey, Mr. Simon Hughes, Mr. Piers Merchant, Mr. Richard Ottaway, Mr. Clive Soley and Dr. Jenny Tonge, presented a Bill to provide for the licensing and regulation of private hire vehicles, and drivers and operators of such vehicles, within the Metropolitan Police District and the City of London; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 23 January, and to be printed [Bill 10].

Road Traffic Reduction (United Kingdom Targets)

Mr. Cynog Dafis, supported by Ms Joan Walley, Mr. Peter Bottomley, Sir Richard Body, Mr. Alan Simpson, Mr. Don Foster, Mr. Dafydd Wigley, Mr. Jim Cousins, Ms Julia Drown, Mr. Stephen Pound and Mr. Andrew Robathan, presented a Bill to make further provision for road traffic reduction targets; and for related purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 30 January, and to be printed [Bill 11].

Energy Efficiency

Mr. John Burnett, supported by Mr. Richard Allan, Mr. John Austin, Mr. Tim Boswell, Mr. Michael Colvin, Mr. Cynog Dafis, Ms Julia Drown, Mrs. Linda Gilroy, Mr. Alan Simpson, Mr. Matthew Taylor, Ms Joan Walley and Mr. Tim Yeo, presented a Bill to make further provision for energy efficiency: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 6 February, and to be printed [Bill 12].

Employment of Children

Mr. Chris Pond, supported by Mrs. Ann Clwyd, Mr. Jeremy Corbyn, Mrs. Llin Golding, Ms Margaret Hodge, Miss Oona King, Mr. Archy Kirkwood, Mrs. Alice Mahon, Mr. Andrew Rowe, Mr. Richard Shepherd, Angela Smith and Mr. Peter Temple-Morris, presented a Bill to make further provision for the protection of persons in employment under the upper limit of school age, by restricting hours of employment, especially on Sundays, and by other means: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 13 February, and to be printed [Bill 13].

Cold Weather Payments (Wind Chill Factor)

Mr. Nigel Evans, supported by Audrey Wise, Mr. David Atkinson, Mr. David Ruffley, Mr. Edward Garnier, Mr. Nick Hawkins, Mr. Stephen Day, Mr. Brian Sedgemore, Mr. Jamie Cann, Mr. Donald Anderson, Mrs. Margaret Ewing and Mr. Menzies Campbell, presented a Bill to provide that wind chill factor is taken into account in the calculation of cold weather payments; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 23 January, and to be printed [Bill 14].

Employment (Age Discrimination in Advertisements)

Ms Linda Perham, supported by Mr. David Winnick, Mr. Roger Berry, Ms Yvette Cooper, Mrs. Linda Gilroy, Angela Smith, Mr. Don Foster, Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones, Mrs. Margaret Ewing, Mr. David Atkinson, Mr. Andrew Rowe and Mr. Quentin Davies, presented a Bill to prohibit discrimination on the basis of age in the advertising of employment vacancies: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 6 February, and to be printed [Bill 15].

Public Interest Disclosure

Mr. Richard Shepherd, supported by Mr. Malcolm Bruce, Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours, Mr. Ross Cranston, Sir Patrick Cormack, Mr. Cynog Dafis, Mr. Iain Duncan Smith, Mr. John Healey, Mr. Giles Radice, Mr. Andrew Rowe, Mr. Don Touhig and Dr. Tony Wright, presented a Bill to protect individuals who make certain disclosures of information in the public interest; to allow such individuals to bring action in respect of victimisation; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 12 December, and to be printed [Bill 16].

Breeding and Sale of Dogs

Mr. Mike Hall, supported by Mr. Nick Ainger, Ms Helen Southworth, Mr. Tim Loughton, Angela Smith, Mr. Matthew Taylor, Helen Jones, Mr. Colin Pickthall, Laura Moffatt, Mr. Andrew Miller, Mr. Terry Lewis and Mr. John Heppell, presented a Bill to amend and extend certain enactments regulating the breeding and sale of dogs; to regulate the welfare of dogs kept in breeding establishments; to extend powers of inspection; to establish records of dogs kept at such establishments;

and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 30 January, and to be printed [Bill 17].

Disability Rights Commission

Mr. Roger Berry, supported by Mr. Harry Barnes, Miss Anne Begg, Mr. Peter Bottomley, Mr. Paul Burstow, Mr. Robin Corbett, Valerie Davey, Mrs. Margaret Ewing, Lorna Fitzsimons, Mr. Tom Levitt, Rev. Martin Smyth and Mr. Dafydd Wigley, presented a Bill to establish a Disability Rights Commission to make recommendations on legislation to achieve comprehensive and enforceable civil rights for disabled people; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 16 January, and to be printed [Bill 18].

Chamber of Commerce (Protection of Title)

Mr. Michael Trend, supported by Mr. Andrew Lansley, Mr. Graham Brady, Mr. Robin Corbett, Mr. Nick Harvey, Mr. Richard Page, Mr. James Paice, Mr. Nick St. Aubyn, Mrs. Caroline Spelman and Mrs. Gisela Stuart, presented a Bill to control the use of the title "Chamber of Commerce" and related titles; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 23 January, and to be printed [Bill 19].

Community Care (Residential Accommodation)

Mr. Marsha Singh, supported by Mr. Andrew King, Mr. Tony Clarke, Mr. Bob Laxton, Ms Kali Mountford, Mr. Paul Burstow, Mr. David Borrow, Mr. Bernard Jenkin, Mr. Roy Beggs, Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones, Mr. John Austin and Mr. Christopher Leslie, presented a Bill to restrict the amount of a person's capital which may be taken into account by a local authority in determining whether he should be provided with residential accommodation that would be, or would be treated as, provided under Part III of the National Assistance Act 1948: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 28 November, and to be printed [Bill 20].

Local Authority Tenders

Miss Oona King, supported by Mr. Chris Pond, Mrs. Ann Keen, Mr. Keith Vaz, Mr. Ben Bradshaw, Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick, Mr. Andrew Love, Mr. Martin Bell, Mrs. Diana Organ, Ms Caroline Flint and Mr. David Lock, presented a Bill to amend the law in respect of non-commercial matters to which local authorities may have regard in awarding contracts; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 16 January, and to be printed [Bill 21].

Waste Prevention

Mr. Piers Merchant, supported by Sir Teddy Taylor, Angela Smith, Mrs. Margaret Ewing, Mr. Matthew Taylor, Mr. Nigel Evans and Mr. Cynog Dafis, presented a Bill to enable certain local authorities to make arrangements to minimise the generation of waste in their areas: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 12 December, and to be printed [Bill 22].

Pesticides

Mr. Ben Bradshaw, supported by Ms Candy Atherton, Mrs. Linda Gilroy, Fiona Mactaggart, Miss Oona King, Mrs. Gisela Stuart, Ms Tessa Kingham, Mr. Matthew Taylor and Mr. Simon Hughes, presented a Bill to amend the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985 in respect of the power to make regulations concerning pesticides and in respect of the enforcement of provisions relating to the control of pesticides: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 28 November, and to be printed [Bill 23].

Energy Conservation (Housing)

Mr. Clive Efford, supported by Mr. John Austin, Mr. Matthew Taylor, Mr. Clive Soley, Ms Joan Walley, Mr. Cynog Dafis and Mr. Alan Simpson, presented a Bill to make further provision for energy conservation related to housing; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 6 February, and to be printed [Bill 24].

Fireworks

Mrs. Linda Gilroy, supported by Mr. Richard Burden, Mr. Ian Davidson, Mr. Patrick Hall, Ms Barbara Follett, Mr. Andy Love, Mr. Piers Merchant, Mr. Barry Sheerman, Angela Smith, Ms Kali Mountford, Mr. Matthew Taylor and Mr. James Wallace, presented a Bill to make further provision about fireworks and other explosives: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 28 November, and to be printed [Bill 25].

Weights and Measures (Beer and Cider)

Mr. Dennis Turner, supported by Ms Jenny Jones, Mr. Ken Purchase, Mr. John Cummings, Mr. Ronnie Campbell, Mr. Mike Hall, Mr. Nigel Jones, Mr. Colin Pickthall, Mr. George Stevenson, Mr. Stephen Day, Mr. Gerald Bermingham and Mr. Robin Corbett, presented a Bill to amend the law of weights and measures in relation to measures of beer and cider; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 12 December, and to be printed [Bill 26].

Orders of the Day

Firearms (Amendment) Bill

Considered in Committee [Progress, 16 June.]

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

PROHIBITION OF SMALL-CALIBRE PISTOLS

Question proposed [16 June], That the clause stand part of the Bill.

5.27 pm

Question again proposed.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I shall be brief, Mr. Lord. As I was saying before I was so politely interrupted on Monday, the Bill is profoundly bad legislation. It is being introduced for all the wrong reasons. It is petty minded, it is mean and it will not do what it is intended to do, which is to protect the public.

Clause 1 relates in particular to the calibre of pistol that the Bill will exclude from use. The idea propounded by the Home Secretary is that a .22 pistol, especially the single-shot pistol that we are discussing today, is as dangerous as any other weapon. Anyone with any knowledge of firearms knows that a .22 pistol—

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman did not bother to come back to the Chamber for the remainder of the debate on Monday, but he should remember that we are dealing with clause stand part, which does not deal only with single-shot pistols.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman is kind to remind me of that, but I knew it already. However, the amendment and the clause deal with .22 pistols, including single-shot pistols.

Mr. Michael: We are not dealing with the amendment.

Mr. Robathan: We are dealing with .22 pistols, including single-shot pistols. The hon. Gentleman, through lack of knowledge and through ignorance, may find it difficult to understand what we are talking about, which is .22 pistols used for target shooting. If they are banned, that will destroy target shooting.

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman says that I do not understand. I remind him that we dealt with the amendment relating to single-shot pistols on Monday. The whole clause is before us now. It deals with the generality of .22 pistols and extends the bounds to all .22 pistols. That is the point of what we are debating now.

Mr. Robathan: The Minister is very kind to inform me of that, but as I have explained to him—perhaps he is being a little obtuse today—that includes single-shot pistols. The idea that a .22 pistol is equally as lethal as other pistols is not correct. When the Minister winds up, I hope that he will confirm whether Mr. Rabin was killed with a .22 pistol. I believe that he was, but the point is that a bullet from a .22 pistol does not carry as far as one from other weapons and you have to get close to someone to kill them. The idea that Mr. Hamilton could have gone round and shot everybody in the head close at hand is absurd, because he would not have had the chance.

My point is whether clause 1 will protect the public. Which weapons are more dangerous than .22 pistols? One could think of pitchforks in "Dad's Army" and many other things. The .22 pistols are not likely to be the chosen weapon of lethality by mental cases such as Mr. Hamilton.

I would like the Minister to answer one further question, which was put by the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) on Monday. Sadly, he cannot be here today. He asked whether it was the Government's intention to do away with the sport of pistol shooting. We should be clear that that will be the effect of the Bill. It will do away with pistol shooting for populist reasons. It will not protect the public, but it will do away with a sport in which many people—not myself—wish to take part.

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman asked me to respond specifically to points that are nothing to do with what is before us. His contribution was one of the most fatuous that I have heard in the House of Commons. He has obviously forgotten which issues we are debating. He asked whether it is the Government's intention to do away with pistol shooting. We made it clear in the debate on Monday—as we made it clear in our evidence to Lord Cullen and on Second Reading—that we had originally hoped to allow the continuation of pistol shooting if that could be achieved consistently with protecting the public. We have made that clear from beginning to end. We also made it clear that we did not believe that the public could be protected except by a complete ban on handguns. That is why we are debating the Bill today.

The banning of .22 handguns, including repeat and single-shot pistols, is the essence of the Bill. The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) may understand, if I repeat myself very slowly and clearly, that it was not the Government's intention to do away with the sport of pistol shooting, but we came to the conclusion, having examined all the evidence—including that given to Lord Cullen, and his conclusions—that the way to protect the public was to ban all handguns. We concluded that the public would not be protected by banning only the 80 per cent. that were made illegal by the 1997 Act introduced by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), who is in his place, and his colleagues.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I am grateful for the Minister's response to the points that were made. It was obvious on Monday that several hon. Members had missed the point of the Bill completely. The amendments that were tabled failed to grasp the real issue. For example, someone asked about the point of safety, which was obvious to most people who were interested in the essence of the debate. If handguns were taken out of circulation and there were no legally held weapons, public safety would undoubtedly be increased. Those weapons would not be available for anyone to use.

The essence of the Second Reading debate was that the resources that police forces would have to use to enforce the previous Government's legislation could—once the Bill has been passed, which I am sure the majority of

hon. Members hope will happen—be used to try to rid the nation of illegally held guns. As someone who held a gun licence for many years and enjoyed the sport of shooting, I resent the suggestions that were made by more than one hon. Member on Monday that firearms holders would find some illegal way to maintain their ownership of guns after the Bill became law. I find that offensive, as I am sure do the vast majority of people who hold firearms certificates. It is nonsense to suggest that they will find ways around the legislation and try to own guns illegally.

Clause 1 is the essence of the Bill. The Minister's comments this afternoon satisfied me and, I am sure, the majority of hon. Members and the nation. Public safety will benefit from the Bill. We should welcome it, get on with the vote and give the Bill a swift passage through the House.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): Clause 1 is the heart of the Bill. I am opposed to a measure that will completely ban .22s, and I also disliked the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997, which confined .22s to gun clubs. I have always argued for the dismantling of .22s and other handguns. I hope that the Minister will respond to the argument today, because it has not been answered effectively, either by the present Government or the previous Government. On Second Reading, the Minister mainly referred to previous answers which he claimed showed that the previous Government's attitude was correct, but they gave only thin answers.

Because I opposed the Bill on Second Reading, I have received letters from people who have contacted me many times before about the human rights issues with which I am normally associated. They are astonished that, for the first time, my response to an issue differs from their attitudes. For the benefit of those people and of the Committee, I wish to explain how someone who has nothing to do with guns and the gun culture comes to believe that dismantling and not a complete ban is the answer.

I wish to explain my position by referring to a letter that I wrote to the Dunblane parents. As part of the Snowdrop campaign, the Dunblane parents visited the House during the Second Reading of the 1997 Act. I met them for 25 minutes and had the harrowing experience of presenting a viewpoint to them that they did not agree with, when all my natural sympathy lay with them and their problems. I do not see myself associated with gun activities, and I am not especially pleased that I have received masses of letters from people in gun clubs thanking me for the stance that I have taken. Gun club members accepted the dismantling argument only when they felt that nothing else was left. I have always believed that dismantling was the right option.

In my letter to the Dunblane parents, I said:

"I would like to explain to you the evolution of my thought on the need for legislation. You won't agree with my position; but your understanding is more important to me than letters of encouragement from gun clubs—whom I just don't identify with.

My views developed through the following stages . . . My initial and lasting response was and is that of any normal person and has been expressed to you many times by people who can explain their feelings much better than I can. It was one of numbness and the deepest fellow human sympathy for the victims, relatives and friends of those involved in the tragedy. I enclose a local newspaper article in which I imperfectly attempted to express such a reaction."

I am sure that all hon. Members share that feeling and wish to respond to the concerns of the Dunblane parents. I continued with my second point:

"I then gave support in June to the 'Dunblane Snowdrop Petition' which, amongst other things said that 'all firearms held for recreational purposes for use in authorised sporting clubs be held securely at such clubs with the firing mechanism removed'. I enclose a press release which I issued in June on the petition."

I should explain that I had issued a press release, which was not used in my local area, so that newspapers would report that I was supporting the Snowdrop petition, thereby encouraging others to sign it. The petition dealt with the arguments for dismantling—although later, as circumstances changed, those involved with the petition moved beyond the position expressed in the petition.

In my letter, I went on to state:

"Labour MPs were issued with a Briefing note in August"—

which I enclosed—

"which I made use of in answering constituents. It called for handguns to be used and kept safely at properly run gun-clubs. Although this statement didn't call for the firing mechanism to be removed, I then felt that could be tackled at the Committee stage of the Bill."

Therefore, at a time when the Labour party was not proposing a total ban, I sent out a letter quite similar to those that hon. Members once attributed to the Minister without Portfolio.

I went on to write:

"I believe that the ground moved towards a total or partial ban following the Conservative majority on the Home Affairs Committee publishing their ill-judged report attempting to defend the home ownership of hand-guns. From my stance . . . above I obviously disagreed with them, but didn't move into campaigning for a total ban, even when it became my party's position."

I held to the argument on dismantling.

I continued:

"When the Cullen report was issued, it reinforced my initial feelings. First, the numbness over the experiences you have all lived through and relived. Secondly, the need to dismantle the firing mechanism of hand guns and come up with an arrangement where no person using hand guns for sporting purposes would have access to a gun they could fire outside of their sports club.

I honestly feel that Cullen's dismantling recommendation is the best way to tackle this terrible problem."

The House has never had a chance to discuss Cullen's recommendations because, as soon as the report was issued, we were dealing with a White Paper and proposed legislation, in which the previous Government made their proposals. Hon. Members should been allowed a proper and full debate on Cullen so that we could better understand the situation. Many hon. Members argue that the House's procedures should be changed so that Standing Committees, like Select Committees, can discuss and investigate the issues behind draft Bills. Such a process could have occurred with the Cullen report, and perhaps no other issue was more deserving of such scrutiny.

I went on to say:

"Prohibition (especially total prohibition) on hand guns will, unfortunately, lead to the growth of illegally held and operated guns."

[Mr. Harry Barnes]

I know some hon. Members believe that such an argument somehow denigrates people who own handguns. I am not attempting to do that. or to suggest that there will be massive growth in such illegal activity—but there will always be reaction to a prohibitive measure. All previous examples of prohibition show that subsequent reaction is likely. I am not associated with gun clubs, but I am—to use prohibition in America as an analogy—rather like a teetotaller who argues against prohibition because of its inherent dangers.

I concluded my letter by stating:

"I believe that I'm pursuing a position that is in line with the initial Snowdrop petition. I hope you feel that there is a sense in which I am still with you and always have been."

In this debate, it is important to hear a view that is not associated with gun clubs or their activity, but which is concerned with the growth of that culture and with containing it and moving it in a different direction. The Bill is not the appropriate measure to achieve those goals. It is a counter-productive and rushed bit of legislation which mirrors the counter-productive and rushed Act passed in the previous Parliament.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): We have heard nothing from the Minister, either today or in Monday's debate, to justify the draconian provisions of clause 1. He has advanced no argument suggesting that some great new advantage in public safety will be achieved if the Bill is passed, and he cannot bring himself to admit the truth, which is that the 1997 Act has already secured public safety. The 1997 Act bans all higher-calibre handguns and insists that .22 calibre weapons be contained only in gun clubs secured to a standard with which the police are satisfied. It also provides that such weapons can be fired only in those specially licensed gun clubs and removed from them only in highly specific circumstances.

Ministers have rejected an amendment tabled by the Opposition, in which we asked whether, with current restrictions, they will exempt single-shot handguns. Ministers said no, and they have adopted an attitude which suggests that they will reject the other amendments that we shall move later in the debate. Their attitude means that pistol shooting as a legitimate, honest sport will be completely eradicated in the United Kingdom.

The Minister failed to say whether, in even the most highly restrictive circumstances, he sees any future for the sport of pistol shooting in the United Kingdom. Obviously, he see no such future because the Government are unwilling to listen. Therefore, because they will not listen, and because they have rejected our amendment, we have decided to vote against clause 1 standing part of the Bill. I reaffirm the decision that we took in Monday's debate. The Minister has done nothing to change that decision, and I urge hon. Members to support us in the Lobby.

5.45 pm

Mr. Michael: I am sorry that the shadow Minister has given in to the rottweilers on the Opposition Back Benches. Reasserting his statement does not make it true: we have provided reasons and arguments in response to each of the points that have been raised in the debate.

I respect the views of my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), but he is completely wrong to say that the issue of dismantling has not been examined. I must put him right on that point, because the issue was fully debated during the passage of the 1997 Act when the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) dealt with it. During the passage of that legislation, the House rejected dismantling of large-calibre handguns and—as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I made clear on Second Reading and in Monday's debate—there are no grounds for considering dismantling .22 weapons, with which this legislation is solely concerned. Dismantling is not a practical option and does not provide the degree of safety that the Government want to achieve by banning all handguns.

The general opposition of shadow Ministers may be sincere, but my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I have already comprehensively dealt with it both on Second Reading and in Monday's debate. The shadow Minister's mention of earlier briefings was irrelevant, because we did not start by arguing for a complete ban on all handguns. We reached our view after a careful and considered examination of all the evidence, which has shown that public safety requires the ban proposed in the Bill. That is why clause 1 should and must stand part of the Bill.

Question put:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 352, Noes 167.

Division No. 31] **[5.47 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard *(Shef'ld Hallam)*
Allen, Graham *(Nottingham N)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Austin, John
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne *(Aberd'n S)*
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Robert
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain *(Hammersmith & Fulham)*
Colman, Anthony *(Putney)*
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean

Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Ms Clare
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Ms Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Ms Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael John *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Ms Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Ms Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Miss Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Tessa
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Ms Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Ms Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Ms Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Ms Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Ms Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steven
White, Brian
Whitehead, Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Dr Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wright, Tony *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Greg Pope and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beith, Rt Hon A J

Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Thomas
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Cann, Jamie
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(N Essex)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Robert
Madel, Sir David
Maginnis, Ken
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merchant, Piers
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Opik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro & St Austell)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Patrick McLoughlin and
Mr. Bowen Wells.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS AND REPEALS

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I beg to move amendment No. 2, in page 2, leave out lines 11 to 21.

The amendment would ensure that the compensation arrangements were brought back to the House after the Bill was enacted, as under the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997. It is essential because the Bill proposes a qualitative change from the 1997 Act that the Government themselves recognise in their business compliance cost assessment, which claims that gun clubs that cater solely or mainly for target pistol shooting will probably have to close. Given that admission, that qualitative change requires further debate.

I am sure that the Government's response will be that they want to enact the Bill quickly and effectively and that the scheme already exists as an ex-gratia scheme, but further debate is necessary because of that step change and because of its impact on business. I have not heard any significant and serious arguments why that impact should not be recognised in the Bill, and further debate would ensure that Opposition Members can have their say.

6 pm

We must be allowed to advance the consistent and coherent argument in favour of recognition being given to the costs to business, especially to those that have incurred debts to set up shooting clubs and shooting associations and will now be left with those debts. Because of the total ban on pistol shooting, no reasonable person could envisage being able to carry on in business if pistol shooting is their sole business. Recognition must also be given to businesses that have lost sales of guns and ancillary equipment. They were going to be harmed by the previous legislation and we felt then that they should be compensated, but that harm will now be compounded in that they cannot pick up compensatory business in .22 sales to replace lost sales of higher-calibre weapons.

Those are serious issues and we do not feel that our arguments have been responded to seriously. The Government have argued that we might be setting a precedent, but we are confident that precedents exist for compensating businesses, such as those arising from the channel tunnel discussions. Issues of compensation and precedent have been raised, but the Government have given us no coherent and consistent intellectual statement on how issues of fairness and justice—the true issues involved in compensating business—can be addressed under the current ex-gratia scheme.

The Bill would simply enshrine in law the ex-gratia scheme and go forward with that. The amendment would require the issue of compensation to be brought back to the House and I urge the Committee to accept the amendment so that we get that further debate.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): I strongly agree with the general comments made by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan). I particularly endorse his adoption of the phrase "a step change"—the use of which is not unique to me—to describe the implications of the Bill.

I want to focus the Minister's attention on a specific part of the .22 compensation arrangements. If I do not raise it now, it might not be raised at all. The Government have tried to be helpful, but, in doing so, they have created both the potential for a difficulty of principle and a potential rather than a real inequity. It is right to raise the issue now so that the Minister can consider it. It relates to the fact that with the best motives, as was made clear on Second Reading, the trigger date for compensation for .22s will be October 1996, rather than the date of the announcement in May 1997.

Let me first deal with the point of principle.

Mr. Michael: I might be able to help the hon. Gentleman. This is an important point, but it is one that I have already clarified and I may be able to prevent him from going down a long road.

We have chosen the date of October 1996 because that is the fairest point at which to set the level of compensation. It is fairest to shooters and probably means that they will be better compensated than if we had chosen the May date, which was when the decision was taken and entered in the Queen's Speech.

Mr. Boswell: I am most grateful to the Minister for his clarification. I concede that the Government have proceeded with the best of motives, but I want to draw out two potential problems arising from that.

The first point is one of principle. I hasten to say that I am not a lawyer, but I know a little about the law of compulsory purchase. The normal way in which compulsory purchase operates is from the date of entry, or of taking possession, or possibly of notice to treat—for example, if one is required to give up one's land for a bypass, the compensation code takes effect with the valuation set at the time at which one's land passes from one's possession or thereabouts. Similarly, the normal practice when tax codes change, although I am sure that counter examples can be cited, is that the law changes with announcements made on Budget day or thereabouts. Any change is not normally applicable to events that occurred before the Budget, although sometimes it has to be.

My point of principle is that it is an unfortunate departure from a more normal practice of Government that we are not basing compensation on the date when any reasonable person who was the owner of a .22 would have realised that he or she might have to surrender that weapon. That troubles me.

However, there is a further point—

Mr. Michael: I am trying to be helpful because the hon. Gentleman is trying to deal with a serious point.

After October 1996, although the Government at that time intended to ban only the largest-calibre handguns, it must have been obvious that it was increasingly likely that, following the general election, there would be a change of Government, that we would move to a full ban—as we are doing—and that, therefore, values would drop.

If, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, we used the May date to calculate compensation, it would disadvantage shooters. He should appreciate that we have tried to act in the best interests of the shooters who stand to be compensated.

Mr. Boswell: Let us not go into whether a specific elector or owner of a gun did or did not believe that there would be a Labour Government in four or five months' time; let us confine ourselves to the reality. The Minister rightly notes—the point was made on Second Reading—that the majority of those pistols will have dropped in value between October 1996 and May 1997. I believe that the Government have proceeded with good intentions, even though there is a technical breach of the usual attitude to compulsory purchase, which I have explained to the Committee. I accept their good intentions, but I want to pause on a couple of points.

First, I want to mention something that I discovered by accident the other day when reading a short item about the compulsory purchase of land in a journal that came into my hands. In a recent case, Wickham Growers Ltd. *v.* Southern Water 1997, which I believed is reported in the *Estates Gazette*,

"it was held that the compensation payable for disturbance"—

although it may well apply to other matters as well—

"may have regard to events which occur after the date of entry, even where those events could not be predicted at the time."

That might help in relation to setting an earlier valuation, and Ministers should at least consider that point.

Secondly, I want to express my substantive concern for a specific group of shooters in relation to the compensation statement. I am not an expert on the proposals even of the previous Government, but they consist of the ex-gratia scheme, the specified code under which smaller-calibre weapons as well as larger-calibre ones can be surrendered from 1 July onwards, and option C for specific cases.

It would have been perfectly open, and not perverse or irrational, to a shooter with a .22 weapon to have enhanced the value of that weapon—to have customised it or for another reason to have increased its value—between the date in October 1996 and 14 May 1997, the date of the Queen's Speech. It is unfortunate and unfair if that cannot be taken into account in the compensation arrangements.

We appear to be breaching the usual rules under which compulsory purchase is determined. I am sure that the Government seek to do so for the best of motives: they wish to give owners of .22 weapons a better deal than if the literal date of the Queen's Speech were used. I wonder whether it would be more sensible in principle to use the later date, perhaps even to raise the figure, because the further one gets from the date, the more difficult valuation is. However, I am saying that there may be cases where, quite legitimately and properly, a shooter might have enhanced the value of his weapon before the possession

[Mr. Boswell]

of that weapon became illegal or became questioned by a firm Government decision, in which case a small inequity might arise. I make the point only to say—

Mr. Michael: In that circumstance, the shooter would of course be able to go through the alternative route proposed in the Bill, by seeking a valuation. The specific circumstances are covered in the arrangements that we have proposed.

Mr. Boswell: I am grateful to the Minister for seeking to clarify that, but may I have further clarification? In that case, would the valuation be at the date in October or would it be at the last possible date, in May, if the value had been enhanced by then? If that is not so—

Mr. Michael: The later date.

Mr. Boswell: If that is the case, I believe that, although the objection in principle stands and the Minister might like to reflect on that, the objection in practice may not stand. I believe that he and all of us wish to seek the fairest possible deal for shooters in what are bound to be difficult circumstances. I merely pray this issue in aid as a case for a more rounded consideration of the details of the compensation issue, to eliminate any possible unfairness.

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) on the way in which he moved the amendment. I support the amendment, and in my short contribution I shall ask the Minister of State a couple of questions to which I am sure he will reply later.

6.15 pm

As recently as last week, we considered compensation when we debated the compensation scheme introduced by the Government under the previous Act, the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997. In that debate, it was suggested that it might have been sensible to incorporate compensation for .22 weapons in the same draft compensation scheme, but I appreciate that, with all the technicalities involved, that might have been difficult, if not impracticable.

During last week's debate, we drew attention to the inaccuracies or inadequacies and errors in the original draft compensation scheme tabled on 22 May, which was then withdrawn and re-tabled on 3 June. We put it to the Minister of State that some explanation was required, and we wanted to know why so many changes were required and how many there were.

I thank the Minister for the answer given on 9 June at column *328* to my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) in reply to a question about the changes in that draft compensation scheme. They amount to 37 changes in all, and are a combination of errors, factual errors, and items and values listed in the annexes that were wrong. I now ask, how accurate is the new draft compensation scheme likely to be? I very much hope that when the Government come up with a new scheme, they make a better job of it than they did of the last one.

How soon are we likely to see the new draft compensation scheme for .22 pistols and for the ancillary equipment that goes with them? When addressing that compensation scheme, would the Minister think in terms of compensating for the loss of business, and so on?

In the Bill, estimates are made of £12 million for the cost of weapons and £19 million for equipment, but several people have suggested that those figures are underestimates. Perhaps the Minister will give us a more accurate estimate of the likely compensation total.

Mr. Hancock: I believe that, if they were realistic, hon. Members would concede that most gun owners and certainly people who were trained in guns would say that the value of their weapons and of weapons held in gun clubs and in gunsmiths devalued the day after Dunblane. Once that incident took place, the true value of any weapon was seriously eroded by the hour, if not by the day. That was recognised by gun owners throughout the country.

The compensation legislation allows the individual gun owner to choose between several ways of disposing of a gun. Most of those options are, in the main, very fair. If hon. Members who know about guns study the comparison prices, they will find that, although some individual gun owners will query the value of their individual gun, the figures give a pretty fair price for guns, bearing in mind the circumstances that forced Parliament to take the decisions that it did.

The point is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) said, that Parliament and the Government should have the chance to look again at the unique difficulties faced by some gun clubs and their members when it comes to compensation. Our amendment is a safety valve to allow for some of those difficulties. On Monday, Members of all parties referred to the problems that they knew gun clubs and members—some of them not active members—would face because of the huge sums of money, sometimes running into hundreds of thousands of pounds, which are at stake. That will leave small groups of members with substantial liabilities and not many assets to dispose of apart from the land on which a club is situated.

I hope that there will be general support for the amendment. It will at least allow the Government to say that they have re-examined the issue of equitable compensation and will give the Committee a chance to vote for it.

Mr. Maclean: The Opposition will support the Liberal Democrat amendment. It is intolerable that the Government should not follow the scheme in the 1997 Act. After all, the Minister spent most of Monday saying that he was religiously following the precedent of that Act and did not wish to depart from it. Yet this scheme departs from the one in the 1997 Act, under which the Government would prepare a draft compensation scheme, lay it before the House and, following a resolution, come up with a final version.

I cannot understand why the Government are afraid to put such a draft before hon. Members. They have an overwhelming majority; they could get it through easily. There would, however, be scope for Opposition Members and Labour Members to point out errors and inconsistencies, and experts from the gun trade would have the chance to make similar points.

This is another example of the Government riding roughshod over the House—ignoring it, circumventing it, or neutering it—as they tried to do with Prime Minister's questions. In this case, they are ignoring Parliament by not laying the draft before the House.

In the original draft scheme that we approved last Monday, there were, as my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) said, 37 errors. I do not criticise the officials responsible for that. With a highly complex scheme, it is quite understandable that mistakes will be made. Neither was there anything sinister about withdrawing it. Some values rose, some fell, and mistakes were corrected. The point, however, is that it gave the Government, the industry and hon. Members a chance to look at those mistakes. Then the Government speedily produced a revised draft and laid it before the House, which had a chance to approve it last Monday night. No one voted against it—everyone agreed with it.

Why the phenomenal rush? Why are the Government afraid to trust hon. Members by following the procedure in the 1997 Act and letting them have a look at what they propose? They know that they can drive it through. They know that if the proposals are as sensible as the ones we saw last week—and as fair—there will be no opposition from any quarter. So unless the Minister has a compelling reason for not supporting the amendment—I cannot imagine what it would be—we shall join the Liberal Democrats in voting for it tonight.

Mr. Michael: I regret that opportunism on the part of the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and the Opposition. With his experience of government, he will know that there is not a shred of substance to any of his criticisms of the Government. He is wrong to suggest that the compensation element departs from the principles of the 1997 Act.

The right hon. Gentleman asked what the rush was. It is simply that we want to get .22 guns out of public ownership as quickly as possible. If he had allowed a free vote during the passage of the 1997 Act, such guns would have been banned then. The move would have succeeded on a free vote and we would not have needed this legislation. It is, therefore, his fault that we must deal speedily with the flaw that he left in the legislation by failing to deal properly with a ban on handguns. He had the chance when in government, but he failed to take it.

The right hon. Gentleman was wrong about virtually everything. He was certainly wrong to refer to errors and mistakes. When trying to put right the wrong that he left behind him, we consulted people involved in the sport and the trade and took their suggestions into account. I am grateful for the Opposition's acknowledgment that that was sensible.

Referring to errors and mistakes was rather cheap. We did the best we could to carry on consultations right up to the last minute so as to be able to amend the scheme and use the most precise possible figures.

I have valued the contributions by the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock). He has enhanced his reputation in the short time he has been here with his constructive interventions. He said that it is possible to query specific estimates but that the general scheme seeks to be fair. The legislation includes the safety valve of allowing for a specific valuation; so—this answers the point made by the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell)—if a specific piece of equipment is the subject of an error, that error can be rectified. The fact that a specific value is set out in the statutory instrument does not mean that there is no way of getting around it.

Ours is a sensible scheme. I must tell the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) that he sometimes seems to mix up his speeches as between one debate and another. He has a habit of re-running previous debates, and he does not listen to answers that he was given in those debates. We have already explained the 37 changes to which he referred. It is only sensible to take account of advice from sporting and business interests, even though we are trying to get legislation through quickly, so as to give sportsmen and the general public a coherent scheme that will deal with all sizes and calibres of handgun as quickly as possible. As I have told him several times—he does not seem to have grasped it—the scheme is available in the Library, as we pointed out on Monday last.

Of course, total costs can be estimated accurately only to a certain degree—by their nature they are based on estimates. The numbers and types of weapons have been gathered from information given by the police around the country. Estimates have been refined during discussions between officials and police, especially those involved directly with firearms, and business interests and the clubs have also been included. Discovering the precise quantity of guns and ancillary equipment is not a precise science. Listing and valuing each and every weapon would cost a great deal and would cause enormous delays.

I answered most of the points made by the hon. Member for Daventry in interventions because I thought that he was trying to tease out some specific information while making some interesting points about compensation. There are various ways of trying to be fair. Choosing the October date for high-calibre guns, thereby avoiding further declines in value that would come with a later date, is, we believe, the fairest way to approach the valuation of guns and equipment; it is in the interests of shooters. If someone has enhanced his equipment, the alternative route of a specific valuation is available.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about property valuation, but I should have thought this case was more like valuing second-hand cars. There will clearly be a decline in value if someone does not wish to purchase. The likelihood of legislation increases the probability that values will fall, but if that general point does not cover a particular circumstance, specific valuation provides an alternative.

Mr. Boswell: On the specific point that I raised, I am satisfied with the assurance that the Minister has given in relation to guns that may have appreciated in value because of action by their owners. That is precisely why I did not table a specific amendment. I did not wish to send a signal to the Minister and his hon. Friends suggesting that there might be some general diminution in the compensation payable, on account of one or two particular hard cases. Now the Minister has satisfied me on the hard cases.

Mr. Michael: I am grateful for that; it takes the sting out of my final point. A later date might be popular with the Chancellor of the Exchequer because it would reduce the sum to be paid out, but I doubt whether it would be a popular move with the shooters who would seek compensation. I am glad that we can now agree on that.

6.30 pm

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) made some reasonable points when he opened the debate, but the amendment would not bring about the aim that he sought. It would not widen compensation to businesses. Any scrutiny that was undertaken by the House would be scrutiny of the compensation allowed by the Bill, and the Bill does not allow the wider compensation of businesses for loss of business, any more than the 1997 Act did.

Neither measure allows for that possibility. Scrutinising the way in which the compensation would be paid would not achieve the effects that the hon. Gentleman stressed. The amendment would not reopen that issue. It would allow parliamentary scrutiny only of the way in which we compensate owners and dealers for the .22 pistols and the ancillary equipment.

I shall explain why I do not think that the amendment would be helpful or good for shooters and the general public. It would require the details of a compensation scheme for small-calibre pistols to be subject to affirmative approval. The effect would be that the Secretary of State could not make compensation payments to owners of small-calibre pistols until the scheme had been approved by both Houses. I see no need for that. Indeed, it could introduce a fresh mischief. It would cause pointless delay and would not be in the interests of the public at large or of shooters.

As I said last week, when we debated the compensation scheme for the 1997 Act, the scheme for small-calibre pistols will be structured on the same basis as that for the higher-calibre weapons. Why require both Houses to go over the same material? Details of the ex-gratia scheme that will operate for small-calibre pistols and ancillary equipment until the compensation scheme comes into force have already been placed in the Library. Copies are being issued to all claimants at the same time as details of the compensation scheme already approved by the House.

We are encouraging shooters to hand in their guns at one time, which many have said that they wish to do, rather than to wait until the Bill has completed its passage through both Houses. Requiring the further compensation scheme for small-calibre pistols to be approved by both Houses would mean an unwelcome delay in bringing the Act into force. We want to remove the firearms from circulation as soon as possible. It is clear from the overwhelming majority who voted for the Bill on Second Reading that they would not want any delay.

It is in the interests not only of the Committee and the public, but of claimants, who no doubt would welcome the introduction of the scheme sooner rather than later so that they can receive their compensation.

Although I fully understand the sensible and coherent arguments advanced by the hon. Gentleman, I do not think that the amendment would have the effect that he seeks. It would introduce a number of fresh mischiefs, which I am sure he would not want to do.

Mr. Richard Allan: I am grateful to the larger Opposition party—or should I say parties?—for their support of the amendment, whatever aspersions are cast on its motives.

I support the main thrust of the Bill, which is the complete ban. The step change exists. If it was necessary for the House to give affirmative approval for a scheme when we were banning 80 per cent. of handguns, it is even more important that we give prior affirmative approval for a scheme that comes into force when we ban 100 per cent. of all handguns.

I shall not go over all the motives—I am trying to set my own precedent by keeping speeches to three or four minutes, as I think that helps hon. Members to pay attention. I intend to press the amendment to a Division, and I ask hon. Members to bear in mind that the 100 per cent. ban will have serious knock-on effects which the 80 per cent. ban did not, particularly on the organisations that I mentioned, and that further scrutiny is important.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 190, Noes 305.

Division No. 32] **[6.34 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Thomas
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cann, Jamie
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dafis, Cynog
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(N Essex)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy

Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merchant, Piers
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Opik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Swinney, John
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro & St Austell)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steven
Wells, Bowen
Welsh, Andrew
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Richard Allan and
Mr. Andrew Stunell.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham *(Nottingham N)*
Anderson, Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne *(Aberd'n S)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Robert
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Anthony *(Putney)*
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Ms Clare
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Ms Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Ms Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael John *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Ms Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Ms Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Miss Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Tessa
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony (Manchester C)
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Ms Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Ms Gillian

Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Ms Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim (Eastwood)
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike (N Warks)
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Ms Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Ms Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Dr Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wright, Tony *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. Greg Pope.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr. Maclean: I beg to move amendment No. 5, in page 2, line 21, after 'made.', insert—

'(3B) Payments made under this scheme relating to small–calibre pistols or equipment designed or adapted for use in connection with such pistols, shall be received within 30 days of agreement of the valuation.'.

This is a straightforward amendment. The Opposition believe that the Bill is unnecessary and unfair. Thousands of target pistol shooters up and down the country will be deprived of the sport that they may have enjoyed for many years. Under the legislation as it is currently drafted, Britain's shooters will no longer be able to compete on an international level. Therefore, it is right that the owners of lower-calibre handguns that are banned by this legislation should be compensated speedily with a minimum of delay. The amendment will ensure that that occurs.

We believe that Governments should set an example by paying their bills and debts swiftly. The last Conservative Administration developed a British standard of prompt payment to which all Government Departments and their agencies signed up. As a result, league tables of Government Departments' payment performances are now published. However, the Labour party apparently wishes to go further than that. The Prime Minister has pledged:

"We will introduce a requirement . . . for government departments and public agencies to pay their bills within 30 days".

That is what the then Leader of the Opposition said on 16 September 1996 in a speech to the City of London Corporation.

Much was said during the election campaign about trust. Quite simply, the Government have the opportunity tonight to support the amendment to show that they honour the promise made by the Prime Minister on 16 September 1996. They have the opportunity to demonstrate that they can be trusted to fulfil that promise.

We look forward to receiving the Government's support so that the payments of compensation authorised under the Bill can be made within 30 days, thus honouring the Prime Minister's promise.

Mr. Boswell: To follow on from the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), and given the spirit of our discussions, I invite the Government to consider whether they would be prepared to pay interest should it prove impossible for payment to be made within 30 days in a particular case.

Mr. Michael: It is intriguing to listen to this debate. I am beginning to enjoy the contributions from the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) from the Opposition Benches because I am starting to contrast them with the contributions he made about the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997, which he steered through the House.

Some of the right hon. Gentleman's thought processes are becoming quite convoluted. For instance, if the Opposition are now so keen to specify a time limit on the payment of compensation, perhaps the right hon. Gentleman can explain to us why the then Government did not include such a 30-day time limit in the 1997 Act. After all, he was personally responsible for steering that legislation through the House.

What is good for the goose is good for the gander. If a 30-day limit is reasonable for small-bore handguns and their ancillary equipment, it is similarly reasonable for large-bore handguns and their ancillary equipment. The right hon. Gentleman did not include such a provision in the 1997 Act, but, suddenly tonight, we have a convert to the rapid payment of bills.

Mr. Boswell: The new Government have set themselves up as the proud possessor of higher standards than their predecessor. The Opposition are merely seeking to help and encourage them to impose on themselves the obligation to meet their own high standards.

Mr. Michael: It is very nice of the hon. Gentleman, who was a Minister in the previous Government, to feel

that he has learnt so much during those depressing days that he can now contribute to the quality of the legislation brought forward by the new Government.

I put it to the hon. Gentleman that there is an inconsistency in the Opposition's argument. If they felt that a time limit of 30 days was reasonable, they had the opportunity to set one in the 1997 Act. If they had done so, that would have been mirrored in our compensation arrangements, because, as I made clear in the debates a week ago, the arrangements that we are making for smaller-calibre guns mirror those in the statutory instrument governing the compensation scheme for larger-calibre guns. The Opposition stand condemned out of their own mouths for not even considering what they now, belatedly, argue is an important provision.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): The hon. Gentleman is under some confusion. He is in government and, therefore, he should be making the decisions. We would like the money to be paid in 30 days.

Mr. Michael: In an earlier debate, the hon. Gentleman complained that the Government were being too decisive about getting things done by introducing legislation to get rid of .22 handguns, which he is so keen to keep on our streets and in our homes. We are getting on, fairly and reasonably, with that job.

The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border said that we are a Government who believe in paying bills on time. He is right, but the amendment does not attempt to ensure that bills are paid on time. Instead, it would guarantee a short period of time after the agreement on a valuation within which all the money would be received. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman could clarify whether he intends to target the amendment only at those claims made under option C, which include individual valuations. If disputed, that might mean that an independent valuation is made.

I am not sure whether the right hon. Gentleman has thought that through and whether the Opposition's proposal applies only to such cases, or to other options as well. Perhaps he will illuminate the House, now or later, as to his intention in the amendment.

I am afraid that I cannot accept the amendment, although I appreciate its sentiments. As I made clear in debates last week on the compensation scheme under the 1997 Act, payments will be made as quickly as possible. I can assure the House that that assurance applies equally to small-calibre pistols—we wish to deal with the compensation as quickly and as expeditiously as possible.

As we made clear last week, however, the pressures on police forces and the arrangements made by chief constables will vary. Different arrangements will be needed in urban as opposed to rural areas. Those arrangements and the decisions of chief constables must be respected. Those variations will exert different types of pressure on respective police forces. We, too, will put pressure on those forces. I have discussed the matter with representatives of the Association of Chief Police Officers and I am certain that they will try to deal with compensation as quickly as possible. It would therefore be unreasonable to include in primary legislation the requirement sought by the amendment.

The majority of straightforward claims, which will be made under options A and B, will be dealt with quickly. Claims under option C, which will be based on individual valuations, will take longer to process because they will need to be considered individually. It is reasonable that that should be done and that proper consideration should be given in each case.

I am sure that the Opposition, who have argued for the interest of shooters as they see them, would not want us to introduce measures that exerted excessive pressure on the police and others connected with the scheme to rush those arrangements. I stress that adequate time must be given for the scheme to be operated, but, even so, payments will be made as quickly as possible.

Mr. Richard Allan: Do we take it that the time it will take for people to receive compensation will depend on the efficiency of individual police officers, and the burden placed on them? Does the Minister agree that it is therefore likely to be case that, depending on where one lives, the time taken for compensation to be paid could be dramatically different?

Mr. Michael: It could depend on a number of factors. The police are endeavouring to introduce arrangements to ensure that everyone can be compensated as quickly as possible so that the receipt of handguns and their ancillary equipment can be completed as expeditiously as possible.

It is impossible to be sure where a rush might occur. All the members of a shooting fraternity in an area may decide to hand in all their guns quickly. It is quite likely that all members of a gun club would agree on when to hand in their guns and seek compensation. Some of the pressures are unpredictable and that is what makes it unsafe to try to specify a constrained period of days, as proposed in the amendment.

Mr. Boswell: Will the Minister confirm that the amendment at least seeks to tie prompt payment to the agreed date of valuation, rather than to the date when weapons are handed in? We obviously accept that there is a problem in that regard with option C weapons. We are concerned simply with the administrative delay that might arise after a valuation. No one wishes to put valuers under unreasonable pressure so that they reach a quick, bad decision. Clearly, they must have time to make the right decision.

Mr. Michael: I accept that. I have spoken to the chief constables and others who will be involved in the exercise, so I understand the pressures to which it will subject them. They accept that it is in the public interest that the necessary arrangements should be made and that they should be implemented as expeditiously as possible. Likewise, we accept that we want the payments to be made as expeditiously as possible. The purpose behind the amendment is to introduce a straitjacket. Conservative Members should accept that the Government will do all that they can—we shall have discussions with the police and everyone else involved about the arrangements that we seek to make—to ensure that, as far as possible, we meet the requirements that are being sought within the terms of the amendment. However, to introduce such a straitjacket in primary legislation is inappropriate.

7 pm

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North–East Bedfordshire): I intervene on two points of clarification. The Minister is talking about a straitjacket. As I understand the

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

amendment, the purpose behind it is to put in statutory form the Government's intention to make payment within 30 days. That is obviously 30 days of applying the statutory amount of compensation or the agreed amount of compensation if it comes within option C. I am not clear why the police having to make inquiries has much to do with what we are discussing. I hope that the Minister will be able to provide clarification.

Secondly, is it the intention that interest should arise if someone were left for some considerable time beyond 30 days without compensation? I understand that that lies behind the Government's general proposals for interest on non-payment of debts.

Mr. Michael: I do not see that such a provision lies within the amendment, which would simply introduce a requirement.

We are not envisaging or planning for delays in making compensation payments. Pressure, however, will be put on the police and many others as a result of a temporary arrangement. How quickly we can finalise arrangements and have everyone handing in their guns depends partly on how expeditiously the proposed legislation is enacted and implemented. If the Bill passes through Parliament quickly, much will depend on whether we can back the arrangements for whatever weapons people have not handed in voluntarily to be handed in subsequently and quickly by an extension of the compensation scheme. I have in mind the employment of people and the arrangements that are already in hand.

We are talking of temporary arrangements to deal with specific circumstances. That makes the acceptance of the amendment inappropriate. The general principle is that we should seek to ensure that compensation is paid as quickly as possible and, if possible, within the period to which reference has been made. That might be thought of as aspirational, but it is something that we shall seek to do with the co-operation of everyone involved, if that is at all possible.

There are a couple of points to be made on a problem that is involved in implementing the compensation process. We are talking of 60,000 claimants, who will all submit claims within a short time. It would not be practicable to set a specific number of days within which individual claimants would receive payments. The sheer volume of claims to be made prevents that. Some claims will be processed before others and some claims might take longer than others.

There is, sensibly, no time requirement applying to payments under the compensation scheme for large-calibre handguns. There is nothing in logic, therefore, that requires that there should be one within the scheme for small-calibre pistols. That would be entirely inconsistent.

Mr. Boswell: I raised earlier the issue of interest, and the matter was taken up by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) with greater eloquence. Will the Minister consider, in cases where things go sadly wrong because of some administrative error, the payment of ex gratia interest? I do not seek an immediate answer now. Perhaps he will take away the point and think about it.

Mr. Michael: I hope that there will not be gross incidents of delay, other than those where there might be specific complications on an option C valuation where there is a considerable amount of debate because values are not being accepted. We want to see all cases dealt with as expeditiously as possible. We shall seek to ensure that that happens, and I am sure that we shall receive the full co-operation of the police and all those who are involved in the Home Office. We shall try to ensure that everything goes as smoothly as possible.

We are dealing, however, with a challenging task. We are progressing rapidly because we believe that it is in the public interest for the guns concerned rapidly to be removed from general public ownership. The Association of Chief Police Officers and others have accepted our objective and supported us in trying to get the arrangements into place. I place on record my thanks to all those concerned, including individual chief constables, in seeking to implement the arrangements.

I return to a final point of simple logic: no time limit was placed on larger handguns. I accept, of course, that the Bill does not deal with them. That being so, it would be illogical to put a straitjacket on the way in which we deal with .22 handguns. I accept the aspiration that we deal quickly and efficiently with all claims—I undertake that we shall do all that we can to achieve that—but it would not be sensible or logical to accept the amendment.

Mr. Maclean: This is a matter not of simple logic but of whether or not the Prime Minister's word is to be trusted. There have been some interesting revisions of Government policy this evening from a Minister of State in Her Majesty's Government. We assume that he is speaking with the authority of the Government. We have been told that the policy is not to have payment within 30 days, but to try, with all efforts, to pay as soon as is practicable or as soon as possible, leaving no stone unturned to pay Government debts as soon as they can be paid.

The Minister said repeatedly that we cannot have 30-day payments because that would impose a straitjacket on the Government. Does that mean, therefore, that the Prime Minister's statement on 16 September 1996 that a requirement would be introduced—it was not a straitjacket then, when the right hon. Gentleman was on the prawn cocktail circuit, wining and dining business men and pursuing their votes—by a Labour Government for the millennium was not a commitment that the Government would pay their bills within 30 days?

The previous Government did not insert such a requirement in the 1997 Act because we were content to rest with the provisions that we had introduced with the development of the British standard payment. We had decided to publish league tables of the Government's performance, and we were content to rest on that. At the same time, we took the then Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair), at his word. He went round telling business men that a new Labour Government would introduce a requirement that Government bills would be paid within 30 days.

That is why we have tabled the amendment. We have been presented with our first chance to test the word of the new Government, and especially that of the Prime Minister. Can they be trusted on the issue of the Government paying their bills?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Would I be right in understanding my right hon. Friend to be saying that the word of the Prime Minister for a requirement seems, having regard to the words of the Minister of State, to have become a pious hope?

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. and learned Friend is correct. It was not even a pious hope. It amounted to, "We shall do our best to pay if we can within 30 days." The requirement that the Prime Minister wanted is now regarded by the Minister of State as a straitjacket into which the Government do not wish to insert themselves. It is no wonder that the Prime Minister is concerned about froth on the top of beer glasses. It seems that his concern for the Government to pay their bills within 30 days was froth before the general election. It seems also that it can be blown away like froth from a beer glass.

The Opposition will force the amendment to a Division because it goes to the issue of whether the Prime Minister's words can be trusted or whether they can be overruled by a Minister of State, Home Office.

Mr. Michael: What a surprise. The Opposition have found specious reasons to have another Division. It seems that they need to fill in the time. I have listened with admiration and astonishment to the developing capacity of the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) for invention. What a pious intervention from the right hon. and learned Member for North–East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell).

I have made it clear that we are dealing with a temporary arrangement, which will be dealt with properly by the police and civil servants, under great pressure. The reason for that pressure is that there is pressure to get handguns off the streets and out of people's homes.

The right hon. Gentleman had to find some specious excuse for not having put in his Bill something that he now requires us to put in ours. His arguments were indeed specious. Of course people can trust the word of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. That is why he is Prime Minister, and the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border is where he deserves to be—on the Opposition Benches.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 177, Noes 301.

Division No. 33] **[7.9 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard *(Sheffld Hallam)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Thomas
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Robert
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merchant, Piers
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Opik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro & St Austell)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steven
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David

Willis, Phil
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Patrick McLoughlin
and
Mr. Bowen Wells.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham *(Nottingham N)*
Anderson, Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne *(Aberd'n S)*
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Robert
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon
(Dunfermline E)
Brown, Rt Hon Nick
(Newcastle E & Wallsend)
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda
(Edinburgh Pentlands)
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
(Hammersmith & Fulham)
Colman, Anthony *(Putney)*
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Ms Clare
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Ms Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Ms Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael John *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley
(Stretford & Urmston)
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Ms Melanie
(Welwyn Hatfield)
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny
(Wolverh'ton SW)
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Miss Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Tessa
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Ms Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Ms Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Ms Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, William (Normanton)
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George
(Hamilton S)
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Ms Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine
(Morecambe & Lunesdale)
Smith, Ms Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann
(Dewsbury)
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark

Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George (NW Norfolk)
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wright, Tony *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. Greg Pope.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): The Bill goes much further than the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997: it will kill off pistol shooting and make many gun clubs unviable. The 1997 Act would have allowed pistol shooters to continue with their sport on condition that they used only lower-calibre handguns. During the passage of that Act, we decided against compensating gun clubs for the impact of the ban on higher-calibre guns. An important justification for that view was the fact that shooters of high-calibre pistols could convert to .22s and continue to enjoy their sport. It was difficult to argue that clubs could not continue as venues for pistol shooting while .22 pistols remained lawful.

A total ban will force some clubs to close, and that fundamentally alters the previous position on compensation. The majority of the 2,118 approved gun clubs throughout Great Britain are non profit making: they were set up and are run by volunteers. It is true that clubs whose members shoot rifles and pistols could survive a total ban on handguns, but that would very much depend on the proportion of pistol shooters to rifle shooters. However, clubs that are almost entirely pistol clubs will, in all probability, face certain closure as a result of the Bill.

Hon. Members should bear in mind the fact that the majority of gun clubs are non profit making and do not have vast financial reserves to enable them to weather the storm of a total ban. Given that those clubs have mortgages or leases, their members or owners could face significant personal liabilities and loss as a result of closure.

It is the Opposition's view that, given the extent of the Bill and its departure from the principles of the 1997 Act, which did not bring pistol shooting to an end in this country, the issue of compensation must be revisited. Naturally, we hope that as many clubs as possible will survive, but those clubs that are forced to close as a result of the circumstances created by the total ban on handguns introduced by the Bill should be compensated.

On Second Reading, we argued that the Bill as it currently stands is unfair. At column 1163, the Home Secretary gave an entirely reasonable response. He said that if the Government had departed from the principles that we had followed, he would consider the point that we had made. I regret to say that the Minister was a good deal less reasonable when he wound up the debate. He dismissed our questions by referring to the debate that had taken place at the beginning of the last week on the compensation arrangements under the 1997 Act, but we were not objecting to those arrangements. Our argument is that the total ban introduced by this legislation fundamentally alters the position. That is why we believe that the arrangements proposed by the Government are unfair, and why we do not believe that clause 2 should stand part of the Bill.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) on compensation. It would not involve a large number of clubs. Some of them are small businesses. However, a significant number will go out of business. People who are not rich will be left with burdens of debt for which they have no possibility of compensation unless the Government are prepared to reconsider the matter along the lines that the Home Secretary seemed to accept but to which the Minister offered blanket opposition.

What we are asking for is entirely reasonable. When pistol clubs were denied the use of a heavier grade of pistol, they could have set up afresh or reconstituted themselves as clubs using .22 handguns. There would have been support for that, for reasons connected with the Olympic games and for the more specialised reasons connected with disabled people, which we shall debate in a moment.

It follows inexorably from the Government's determination to take all pistols out of private ownership and to stop clubs holding pistols that gun clubs that are confined to pistols must close. If they have debts or mortgages, they will be left uncompensated. All I ask of the Minister is that he listens carefully to our argument. If he is not capable, by reason of the instructions that he has been given, to give us the answer that we seek now, I hope that he will he go away and think about it.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North–East Hertfordshire): There is a distinction between higher-calibre handguns, such as were used by Thomas Hamilton and which were outlawed under the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997, and the .22 calibre weapon that we are debating. When decisions were made under the previous Government, one factor that was taken into account was that a higher-calibre handgun is not specifically designed for sport. Many of those weapons have been developed for use in self-defence and by police forces and the military.

The higher-calibre handgun, which tends to be used against individuals, should be seen in a different context from the .22 handgun, which is used in international sport. Target shooting with .22 guns is accepted as an international sport throughout the world, and recognised as such by the Olympic movement. No doubt there are reasons for that. The .22 is used mainly for sport, and lacks some of the features of higher-calibre handguns to which I have referred.

7.30 pm

Against that background, the Committee should view the compensation issue differently. It is one thing to get rid of certain handguns because they are higher-calibre weapons; it is different to say that there shall be no target shooting in Britain when the wisdom throughout the world is that target shooting may occur in particular conditions—and the 1997 Act laid down the strictest possible security conditions. I think that the last Government were right to say, "We are not outlawing the

[Mr. Oliver Heald]

sport altogether; if you wish to follow the conditions laid down in the Act, you may continue. You have that option." What is now being said is "There shall be no sport of this kind: every club in the country must close." That is relevant to the question of compensation.

Apart from being a very authoritarian measure, the proposal should prompt new Labour to think about the fact that every other country, and every international sporting body, is prepared to permit the sport to continue. Is it right for Britain to be the one country which is standing out against it? It is in that context that the considerations relating to compensation in this Bill are so different from those in the 1997 Act.

All the gun clubs will have to close, and many of their owners—some in my constituency—will be in financial difficulty. Could not the Government meet the Opposition at least half way—perhaps a little further—and make compensation available to clubs?

Mr. Michael: I have listened carefully to what has been said, but I can respond briefly, because nothing new has been contributed. All the points that have been made have been answered comprehensively, convincingly and repeatedly, on Second Reading and before and since then.

The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), the shadow Home Secretary, says that the Bill will kill off pistol shooting and close many gun clubs. Let me remind him that precisely the same argument was advanced by Conservative Members when he introduced the Bill that is now the 1997 Act. There is nothing new in it, and he rejected it then. He should read the speeches that he made when he was in government, because they deal comprehensively with the speeches that he is making in opposition.

Mr. Heald: Surely even the hon. Gentleman accepts the difference between stopping all target shooting—and therefore closing every gun club in the country—and leaving the option available.

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman should heed the arguments that have been advanced by his hon. Friends on other occasions. It is nice of him to join us for a while, but he is making precisely the points that they have made previously. We have been through those arguments time and again; we debated them on Second Reading. We will reject the extension of compensation suggested by the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe, for precisely the reasons that he gave in government. He was not willing to extend compensation to businesses, and nor are we.

It comes down to a simple point of disagreement: we simply disagree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. He could have dealt with the proposals in the Bill much earlier in the year if he had allowed a free vote when he was piloting his Bill through the House, but he was not willing to listen then, and we are therefore having to deal with the issue now.

Sir Nicholas Lyell *rose—*

Mr. Michael: Perhaps what the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe gave us was a spare speech left over from Second Reading. He does not agree with the Bill; he does not agree with the banning of .22 guns. We feel that it is necessary to ban them, and that his decisions in rejecting that proposition—

The First Deputy Chairman: Order. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) must not remain standing when an hon. Member is addressing the Committee.

Mr. Michael: I am making a very brief point—

Sir Nicholas Lyell *rose—*

Mr. Michael: I give way to the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am grateful to the Minister, but will he please address the argument? It is not good enough simply to say that counter-arguments were advanced in the debate on the earlier Bill. The question that we want the Minister to answer is this. As a result of the blanket ban on handguns, which wipes out the .22, small clubs and small businesses are themselves wiped out in certain instances. Is it the Government's policy not to compensate a small club or business in any circumstances? If so, will the Minister please explain why?

Mr. Michael: We have explained ad nauseam. Great credit was given to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for being so open and honest on Second Reading about what the effect of the Bill would be, and he was right to be honest. It is better to have the matter out in the open—but that has left nothing for the right hon. and learned Gentleman to chew on at this stage. We rejected the idea of extending compensation to businesses, just as his right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Home Secretary did. We believe that retaining .22 guns would be dangerous, and we are not willing to do it. That is why we are going to vote on the matter. We have presented the measure quickly, so that the change to only .22 pistols—and hence another round of change and compensation—will not be required, as it would have been had we delayed it.

I am afraid that, again, there is disagreement between us. We believe that it would be unsafe to allow the partial—80 per cent.—ban on handguns introduced by the last Government. We need the ban on .22 guns in the public interest, and it is therefore essential that the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Richard Allan: As I become accustomed to the proceedings of the Committee, I find that I am having to live with a chronic sense of deja vu as arguments are repeated again and again at every stage. We advanced the argument that we wanted to present—about the inadequacy of compensation—in the amendment that we tabled, but, now that we have lost that, I believe that those of us who support the Bill's aims in general, while disagreeing with the compensation scheme, should accept with good grace that the clause should stand part of the Bill. Those of us who disagree with the Bill in principle—and a number of Liberal Democrats do, for good, sound Liberal reasons—will continue to oppose the clause.

Mr. Howard: Once again, the Minister has completely failed to deal with our arguments. He does not deal with

them by saying that he has already dealt with them, when he manifestly has not; nor does he deal with them by saying that there is a disagreement between the two sides. Of course there is a disagreement. What we expect from the Minister in these circumstances is some kind of reason justifying the Government's position, but we have heard no reason at all.

The trouble with the Minister is that he is so obtuse that one never quite knows whether he is deliberately failing to see the point, or accidentally and genuinely failing to do so. Let me repeat the point in the simplest language that I can use—and I will be happy to give way to the Minister if he wishes to answer it at last.

The point is simply this. There is a fundamental difference between the provisions of this Bill and the provisions of the 1997 Act. The Act did not bring pistol shooting to an end. It was therefore possible for clubs where pistol shooting took place to continue, and .22 shooting could continue in those clubs although the legislation had banned the use of higher-calibre pistols. This Bill brings pistol shooting completely to an end and that means a fundamental difference in the attitude to compensation.

On Second Reading, the Home Secretary said that he would listen carefully to any arguments that sprang from the proposition that the Government had departed from the principles that we had previously advanced. As I said at that time, it was not so much a suggestion that the Government were departing from those principles as that they were failing to apply them to the different circumstances that now pertain. That is the point and, on Second Reading, the Minister, in the most extraordinary way, refused to answer it by referring to the answers that he had given a few days earlier in the debate on the compensation arrangements in the 1997 legislation.

Our point is that this measure is fundamentally different from the provisions of the 1997 Act for the simple and clear reason that I have given. That is why the compensation arrangements need to be revisited and why the clause should not stand part of the Bill.

If, at this 11th hour, the Minister is prepared to answer that argument and explain why the Government disagree with us on this issue, I shall be happy to give way to him. So far, we have had no response whatever to our clear and concise argument. That is why we propose to divide the Committee.

Mr. Michael: The disagreement is that the right hon. and learned Gentleman thinks that the legislation is fundamentally different and we do not. Gun clubs will be able to continue: it is just that their members will not be able to use pistols. They will be able to use rifles. To be called obtuse by the right hon. and learned Gentleman is a curious form of flattery. He does not create a failing on the part of the Government by asserting that there is a failure: he demonstrates an inability to understand the answers that he has been given.

The legislation has been introduced on a point of principle. As a result of looking at all the evidence and listening to all the arguments, we think that there is a need to ban the possession of all handguns, and we do not accept what the right hon. and learned Gentleman says.

Question put, That the clause stand part of the Bill:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 330, Noes 143.

Division No. 34] **[7.41 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard *(Shef'ld Hallam)*
Allen, Graham *(Nottingham N)*
Anderson, Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne *(Aberd'n S)*
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Robert
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain *(Hammersmith & Fulham)*
Colman, Anthony *(Putney)*
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Curtis-Thomas, Ms Clare
Dafis, Cynog
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Ms Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Ms Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael John *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret

Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Ms Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Miss Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Tessa
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Ms Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Ms Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Ms Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Ms Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Ms Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Watts, David
Webb, Steven
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Dr Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. Greg Pope.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merchant, Piers
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm

Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Opik, Lembit
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willis, Phil
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Simon Burns and
Mr. Tim Boswell.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New clause 3

EXEMPTION FOR NATIONAL COMPETITION SHOOTERS

'.—(1) The authority of the Secretary of State is not required by virtue of section 5(1)(aba) of the 1968 Act for a person to have in his possession or to purchase, acquire, sell or transfer a pistol chambered for .22 or smaller rim-fire cartridges if he is authorised under the Act to possess, purchase or acquire that weapon subject to a condition which complies with subsection (2) below.

(2) A certificate granted under subsection (1) above shall be subject to the condition that—

(a) the pistol is used for training in shooting disciplines approved by the International Olympic Committee for inclusion in the Olympic Games; and

(b) the pistol is used by a person approved of by the Secretary of State and who is certified by the recognised governing body of the sport to be a person who has been invited to be a member of the group from which national competitors at international competitions will be selected; and

(c) the weapon is stored and used only at premises designated by the Secretary of State as approved for the storage and use of weapons to which section 5 of the 1968 Act applies; and

(d) possession of the weapon outside such designated premises shall be permitted only for transfer to and use at premises at which shooting competition is taking place during an Olympic Games, or qualifying competitions.'.—*[Mr. Maclean.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Maclean: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss new clause 4—*Exemption for registered disabled national competition shooters—*

'—(1) The authority of the Secretary of State is not required by virtue of section 5(1)(aba) of the 1968 Act for a person to have in his possession or to purchase, acquire, sell or transfer a pistol chambered for .22 or smaller rim-fire cartridges if he is authorised under the Act to possess, purchase or acquire that weapon subject to a condition which complies with subsection (2) below.

(2) A certificate granted under subsection (1) above shall be subject to the condition that—

(a) the pistol is used by a person approved of by the Secretary of State and who has a physical disability and is a registered disabled person; and

(b) the pistol is used for training in shooting disciplines approved by the International Olympic Committee for inclusion in the Olympic Games; and

(c) the weapon is stored and used only at premises designated by the Secretary of State as approved for the storage and use of weapons to which section 5 of the 1968 Act applies; and

(d) possession of the weapon outside such designated premises shall be permitted only for transfer to and use at premises at which shooting competition is taking place during an Olympic Games, or qualifying competitions.'

Mr. Maclean: The Opposition support tough and rigorous gun controls. In office, we gave Britain some of the toughest firearms laws in the world. However, unlike this Bill, our Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 was tough and rigorous, but would have allowed continued controlled use of .22 lower calibre handguns for target pistol shooting. It would have allowed British citizens to continue to compete in .22 calibre pistol events that are recognised in Olympic competition—free pistol, sport pistol and rapid-fire pistol events.

This country has a long-established tradition of target pistol shooting, which is one of the first of the modern Olympic events; it was introduced in the 1870s. Britain does well at the sport. Over the past 10 years, we have won 23 medals in .22 target pistol events at Commonwealth competitions. The instant effect of the Bill will be to kill off that sport, just like that, for all those law-abiding and decent people who enjoy it and do well at it. British citizens, unlike those of any other major sporting nation, will be prohibited from competing in national and international events.

We recognise that the Government want to ban all handguns, but we urge Ministers and the Home Secretary to reconsider the position of national competition shooters. The new clause would allow those existing national competition shooters who represent national pistol shooting squads and those identified by the national bodies as suitable to train for Olympic disciplines to continue to train for and compete in national and international .22 calibre pistol competitions.

The number of competition shooters is small. They are drawn from the national squad, of which there are around 100 members. Before qualifying for the national squad, most shooters will have worked their way up through the 13 squads in the regions covering England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There are around 350 members of those squads.

The new clause would give the Home Secretary the power to designate specific centres—or, if it comes to it, the Opposition would accept even one specific centre such as Bisley, if he is minded to say that two, three, half a dozen or a large number of centres are too many. He could have complete say over how many centres there are. As I say, we would happily accept allowing one national centre of excellence to survive, so that pistol shooting for those few people could continue in strictly controlled

[Mr. Maclean]

conditions. The new clause, therefore, would give the Home Secretary the power to designate specific centres where those competition shooters would be able to train.

At the moment, such a site would obviously be Bisley and, after the Commonwealth games, could also include Altcar. I presume that something will have to be built for the Commonwealth games at Manchester. One or two more sites could be developed around the country, perhaps based on Army facilities.

The new clause is not an attempt to subvert the Bill. It is clear that clauses 1, 2 and 3 have gone through. The Government have made absolutely clear—and they won by large majorities in Committee tonight and on Monday night—the main, central purpose of their Bill: to all intents and purposes, no more .22 calibre weapons will be left in the hands of ordinary people in gun clubs. We have lost the vote on allowing gun clubs to continue in this country, even under the most rigorous and strictly controlled conditions. We are suggesting that the Government should allow one or two international centres of excellence. The Home Secretary could impose strict conditions and they would be the only places in the country where .22 weapons could be stored and fired.

8 pm

Under the new clause, a certificate to shoot at a designated centre would be granted to those chosen for the national squad. People could not just wander in off the street and say, "I fancy a bit of pistol shooting—can I fire that gun?" The people in the national squad are chosen by the governing bodies of competitive target shooting in the United Kingdom—the National Rifle Association and the National Small-Bore Rifle Association, fulfilling the criteria set out by the Sports Council.

We have included in the new clause a provision giving the Home Secretary, or people designated by him, extra discretion to approve the squad members. Therefore, I do not think that the Home Secretary can claim that it would mean a glaring loophole.

We want the sport to survive, in a highly limited way, in Britain. All we are asking for is one or two national centres of excellence, under strict Government control. People using the centres would have to be authorised and licensed to shoot there, and also nominated by the professional associations. They could use only .22 weapons that could not leave the centre, except under strict conditions when shooters are competing at Olympic or Commonwealth competitions.

The new clause is practical. I accept that drafting amendments may be necessary and perhaps it could be tidied up in another place. I hope that the Home Secretary will accept the principle behind what we are trying to achieve.

The right hon. Gentleman cannot claim that it would put the public at risk. No pistols would be held or used outside a designated site. That site would have been approved by the Home Secretary for all section 5 weapons, including the most dangerous, so security would be at the highest possible level.

In addition, competition shooters certified to shoot .22s at a designated site would need a valid firearms certificate, which means that they would have had to pass the chief constable's vetting. They would also have had to be approved by the Secretary of State and approved and vetted by the shooting organisations that govern the Olympic sport of target pistol shooting.

The new clause would allow Britain to continue to compete in target pistol shooting competitions recognised by the Olympic committee. As such, it has been welcomed by Simon Clegg, the general secretary of the British Olympic Association. If the Government do not accept the new clause, for whatever reason, the sport will be destroyed. Then Britain could face absurd and practical difficulties in hosting international sporting events.

Manchester won its bid to host the Commonwealth games because of its commitment to hold target pistol shooting events. The original proposal was to leave those events out of the games, but that provoked such hostility from the other Commonwealth nations that Manchester relented and included .22 target pistol shooting. That is not a shocking fact, given that shooting is the third most popular sport in the Commonwealth games.

If there is to be a blanket ban, and no provision is made for our national competition shooters to continue their sport at a top security designated site, in 2002 foreign competitors will participate and win events that are not only illegal under British law, but in which there will be no contestants from the host country. British teams, which are among the strongest, would be relegated to the terraces.

The Bill as it stands is a Bill too far. We have said repeatedly that it is unfair. We tabled the new clause in an attempt to introduce an element of fairness. I hope that the Government will accept it.

We are also discussing new clause 4, which relates to disabled shooters. I have already said that thousands of law-abiding, decent, upstanding people will lose their sport. The Government have not produced any justification for their draconian provisions.

One group that would suffer from a total ban is disabled shooters. Pistol shooting is one of the few sports in which everyone competes on an equal footing—whether young, old, male, female, able-bodied or disabled. There are scores of disabled shooters in Britain. For many of them, target pistol shooting is more than a pastime—it is an activity which helps substantially to improve their quality of life. Pistol shooting can also help them to cope more effectively with their disability.

The British Paraplegic Shooting Association says that many disabled people are encouraged to take up pistol shooting

"as a rehabilitation means to help with balance and confidence, primarily in the use of a wheelchair and sport. This provides them with a better quality of life and respect for themselves as disabled people in an able-bodied world."

British disabled target pistol shooters have achieved staggering success in international competitions. They use .22 calibre pistols for six events in the Paralympics. At the 1996 Atlanta Paralympics, disabled shooters won silver and gold medals and set a new record. At the European championships in 1995, disabled shooters won one gold medal, two silver and one bronze. In the World games in 1994, they won two gold medals, two silver and two bronze.

I understand that there are about 375 clubs with facilities for the disabled. I think that about 100 disabled people will compete at the fifth annual national

championships organised by the National Small-Bore Rifle Association. Those figures are the best analysis I can make of the probable numbers of disabled people. I am working on the assumption of 375 clubs, each having, perhaps, one disabled member, with about 100 of those wanting to compete. It is obvious, therefore, that our proposal would not drive a coach and horses through the Bill.

The Government want to remove the remaining 20 per cent. of handguns from the general population. I have already made a plea for a specially designated top security site where a national shooting squad could train for the Olympics. The new clause deals with registered disabled people and would benefit at most a few hundred people. They would be subject to the most rigorous controls, would have to hold firearms certificates and, if necessary, could keep their weapons only in specially designated and secure sites.

At this stage in the proceedings, having lost the votes on clauses 1, 2 and 3, we must accept that the Government's main provisions will stand. They will drive them through. Our simple new clause would allow an exemption for registered disabled people so that they could continue shooting lower-calibre pistols at sites designated by the Secretary of State. To ensure that public safety was not jeopardised, the new clause requires each physically disabled shooter to obtain approval from the Secretary of State to shoot at that designated site. They would also have to keep their weapons at that site.

We tabled the new clause to try to make the Bill fairer in some small respects. We have failed to persuade the Government to make it fairer in all respects for the thousands of innocent, honest shooters who will be severely disadvantaged, and the gun clubs that will receive inadequate compensation. We are giving the Government an opportunity to say that, although they intend to stick to the main thrust of the Bill, they accept that, if they impose the most draconian security precautions on a designated site, they will make it possible for a few hundred people—approved by the Secretary of State, licensed and given a certificate by chief constables and approved of by specialist shooting organisations—to continue to represent Great Britain at shooting events.

With similarly strict criteria, they could permit a few hundred disabled people, most of whom would be in wheelchairs, to go to a pistol club and fire pistols under strictly controlled conditions to help their rehabilitation.

If the Home Secretary says tonight that he cannot allow a new clause that would help the disabled, because he believes that it would increase risk and because he wants to prevent massacres such as Dunblane from happening again, in effect he would be saying that he can envisage circumstances in which a disabled shooter would get access to a club, smuggle out a .22 calibre pistol and then, from his wheelchair, carry out the sort of massacre that happened in Hungerford and Dunblane.

That would be the effect if the Home Secretary said, "I am sorry, I cannot allow the new clause, because it would be too big a risk and would undermine the principles of safety behind the Bill." That is what a disabled person would have to do if, as the Government claim, another massacre could be caused by accepting the new clauses.

I urge the Government to think carefully about the new clauses. I expect that the Home Secretary will not be able to accept them tonight, but I urge him—in all sincerity and, after all, he has won all the other votes tonight—to accept these two simple new clauses. I hope that he will at least come back with similar proposals—no matter how draconian the security measures included—that would, at the last ditch, allow the British national shooting squad to continue and a few hundred disabled people to continue with their rehabilitation.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I welcome the fact that the Conservatives have tabled new clauses 3 and 4. However, a form of exemption for both categories could have been included in the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997, in which case I am not sure that the new Government would have been keen to overturn the exemptions in the Bill before us today.

As someone who is opposed to the ban, I have to say that the Bill, even with the new clauses, severely threatens British participation in shooting sports. I do not see where the new generation of people who are trained and experienced for many years will come from; that is an unhappy state of affairs. I wish to address the position of those who might be sympathetic to a ban, but who should consider what we will do with these two categories of people—those who might represent us at the Olympics or in the Commonwealth games, including those taking place in this country, and paraplegic and other disabled shooters.

I asked the Home Secretary on Second Reading whether he had completely ruled out using powers that he already has

"to enable British competitors to participate in the games"—

the Manchester games—

"and to have a period of training before doing so?"

He replied:

"I have not ruled that out altogether and if realistic representations are made to me, I shall think about the proposal. But I should require a high degree of convincing before going ahead with it."—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 1167.]

I cannot understand the logic of holding games in Manchester with participants in .22 shooting from every country in the Commonwealth, who will have trained beforehand, yet not allowing British competitors—the pool from which they will be drawn can already be identified—to train for that contest, even for a few days, unless the Home Secretary exercises his power.

When the time comes, Ministers will find it difficult to defend their position. The press clamour will no longer be for a ban as it was after Dunblane; it will be about what the Government are doing to our British sportsmen. The very newspapers that made such a fuss of saying that the Bill was the answer to Dunblane; which is a controversial contention, will scream at Ministers and ask why they are not giving our boys a fair chance. Ministers should prepare themselves for that. Most ordinary people would think that there was something illogical about the Government's position, even if they were mostly sympathetic to a ban.

I hope that the Home Secretary will consider further what he said to me on Second Reading and consider the new clauses, which set out sensible conditions that would make it reasonable for him to accept them, and find a way for our competitors to prepare for that competition in Manchester. It will take place within a few miles of his constituency, so he must be aware of the feelings that it will arouse. Clearly it would be illogical to make some

[Mr. A. J. Beith]

provision for British competitors taking part in other international competitions, whether held in this country or abroad. The illogicality will be so apparent when the Manchester games take place.

8.15 pm

I also hope that the Home Secretary will reconsider the position of disabled competitors, who may be covered by new clause 3 if they take part in paraplegic games such as the Paralympics. We have a superb record in those competitions. I quote from a letter that I have received from the British Paraplegic Shooting Association:

"Shooting for the disabled was initiated in this country and is now recognised world wide. It would be ironic if Great Britain was the only country to be eliminated from International competitions because of the pressure of media coverage."

The letter requests that we consider

"a special dispensation for our disabled pistol shooters to allow them to train at bona-fide clubs as unlike their able-bodied counterparts it is not simple . . . to go abroad for training purposes. The physical and financial difficulties which disabled people would encounter would 'sound the death knell' for shooters with a disability and end a long and highly successful tradition."

I ask the Home Secretary to consider that request.

I do not think that anyone seriously imagines that a disabled shooter in a wheelchair would be the cause of some future massacre. The arrangements would have to be secure enough to reassure everyone, including disabled shooters themselves, that provisions made for them were so well controlled that their facility could not be abused by someone else.

The Bill provides for exceptions and some people—in specific categories, such as veterinary surgeons and other people using guns for animal welfare—would be able to keep a handgun at home, so it would not be beyond the wit of Ministers and their advisers to find a way to help disabled people to continue to participate in a sport that does them so much good and brings this country so much honour.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) in seeking to persuade the Home Secretary to accept our arguments. We have been round the course several times and the Home Secretary accepts that the only reason for a complete ban is public safety. Therefore, as we narrow the focus, it is incumbent on any Government who seek to impose such a ban to be satisfied at each point that the stringency of the ban remains necessary in the public interest.

The new clauses have focused the debate on two small and highly responsible groups under stringent conditions. The burden on the police to monitor handguns will be massively reduced by the 1997 Act and the blanket ban in the Bill. We are now down to suggestions that a small number of disabled shooters and our national competition shooters, including 100 in the national squad and 350 in the regional squads—let us say, 450 in all—who are all highly responsible people and traceable, should be able to use guns in designated areas.

I do not believe that the Home Secretary can claim that such a small number of handguns under such tightly controlled conditions represents a sufficient threat to justify extending the blanket ban to the categories in the new clauses. If he is still minded to make that argument, I shall expand my case. After the Bill is enacted, a few, comparatively wealthy, shooters will go to train in France or Ireland. They may go further afield, but they will probably cross the Channel or the Irish sea to train. The Government seek to make a virtue of the principle of assisting the many, not the few, but the Bill will go against that principle.

We are talking only about a small number of disabled people and people who wish to train for high-quality, international competition. Those who wish to become really expert will be banished from our shores. The risk of their continuing to use handguns under highly restrictive conditions has to be balanced against the risks of an evilly intentioned person obtaining a handgun—we are only talking about .22 pistols—from some other source.

Earlier, I mentioned France because, as I have said in earlier debates, .22 pistols are freely available there. When I spoke in Monday's debate, I was aware that such weapons were generally freely available, but I had not yet spoken to someone who had walked around Calais or Le Touquet and seen just how remarkably easy it is to buy them.

I have been reprimanded by the Minister of State—who is rather apt to reprimand Conservative Members when we do not agree with him—although I hasten to add that I have not been reprimanded by the Home Secretary, who is always courteous and charming. Conservative Members are attempting to penetrate the Home Secretary's charm and get to his mind, thereby persuading him of our case. I must not go on too long, however, or I shall be counter-productive in that exercise.

The fact, however, is that an evilly intentioned person can obtain a .22 pistol by going to France and bringing one back. The Home Secretary cannot tell me that such a person is likely to be caught by customs at Folkestone, Portsmouth or any other port of entry, because it is not likely.

We are balancing a risk that we cannot protect against—because we have no power over the French, not that I should like to exercise power over the French on this matter, because I believe that the Bill goes too far—against a very minute risk in allowing highly responsible national competitors and disabled people, for whom the sport is very important, not only for their sense of sport but for their rehabilitation, to have limited access to .22 pistols.

I want simply to reinforce the argument that was carefully and cogently made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border, and invite the Home Secretary to think again carefully on the subject.

Mr. Colvin: I, too, should like to support new clause 3 and—like my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell)—I am also guilty of having been reprimanded by the Minister of State.

I was reprimanded for criticising the cynicism of the Home Secretary in applauding Manchester's winning the Commonwealth games. I said that it seemed a bit unfair to applaud that victory, because, whereas overseas shooting teams will be welcomed in Manchester, our own shooters will be denied an opportunity to participate. I refused to withdraw that specific criticism of the Home Secretary.

I am glad to say, however, that the right hon. Gentleman has an opportunity today to enable me to withdraw that criticism unreservedly—simply by agreeing to new clause 3.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Bedfordshire has pointed out that new clause 3 is narrow and would be a minor change to the Bill. It is even more narrow, however, than hon. Members—other than the right hon. Member for Berwick–upon–Tweed (Mr. Beith)—have described. He asked where shooters will come from to qualify for the 13 regional squads—comprising 350 pistol shooters—from which the national squad of 100 members is drawn. His question puts into much sharper focus the difficulty in which United Kingdom pistol shooters will find themselves.

As the Home Secretary has already admitted, the Bill will sound the death knell of a sport in which the United Kingdom excels and has been very successful. We may as well draw down the curtains on it. New clause 3 would merely provide a stay of sentence for people who have already qualified for the national squad and for those who are in the qualification pipeline.

It is worth noting that people who qualify for the national squad have already been in competition shooting for a very long time. Some of them entered the sport as young as 14 years old and worked their way up through the junior ranks of pistol shooters, to age 21, and eventually on to the national team.

New clause 3 would merely give the Home Secretary the power to enable such people to continue the progress that they are already making towards the national squad and, eventually and hopefully, continue the noble tradition of winning for the United Kingdom more gold, silver and bronze medals in competition shooting. I hope that the Home Secretary will give me a reason to withdraw my remarks about his cynicism.

New clause 4 applies all the arguments that we have already heard to an even narrower bunch of shooters: disabled shooters. I take very much to heart—as I hope the Committee will—the remarks made on behalf of British Paraplegic Shooting Association.

There is no doubt that pistol shooting is one of the very few sports in which everyone competes on equal terms—young and old, male and female, the able-bodied and the disabled. Disabled shooters often beat able-bodied shooters because they frequently shoot from a wheelchair, which gives them a degree of stability that may be denied to someone shooting from a standing position. The British Paraplegic Shooting Association has explained very clearly to the Secretary of State why their shooting should be preserved.

As hon. Members have already said, the sport commences at grassroots level and proceeds to Paralympic level. Paralympians train extremely hard at least four times a week, and every day in the run-up to the Paralympics, and shooting is very much their special sport. After the 1996 Paralympics, in Atlanta, the Paralympic committee removed two air weapons events and increased the number of live ammunition events, because competition in air weapons has reached such a high standard, and more competitive participants are needed.

Ministers would be very wise to grant special dispensation to that group of people. Moreover, even if Ministers are minded to refuse new clause 3, I hope that they will accept new clause 4.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): On 11 June 1997, I spoke at some length in the House about the specific needs of disabled shooters. I also intervened in the speech of the Home Secretary to ask him about the special position of Bisley, which is a village in my constituency. The Home Secretary said:

"I shall look at the subject again".—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 1167.]

I speak in this debate to ask the Home Secretary whether he will accept the new clauses and, before the Bill goes to another place, re-examine the subject. I ask also whether he may be able to introduce a modified version of new clause 4 in another place.

As my hon. Friends and the right hon. Member for Berwick–upon–Tweed (Mr. Beith) have stressed, we are speaking about a relatively small group of people—disabled shooters and those involved in the highest levels of competition—about whom the Labour party has always been particularly concerned. Labour has always been very proud, as they should be, of their support for sport and for the disabled.

It would therefore be somewhat surprising for Labour Members, in one of their very first acts in government, to hamper the disabled and damage a very important and successful sport. I ask the Home Secretary to reflect very carefully before he decides on legislation that would be so draconian that it would prevent any effective competition at the highest levels by British sportspeople and by disabled British sportspeople in the Paralympic, Commonwealth and Olympic games.

My right hon. and hon. Friends have already stressed that these are sports which Britain gave the world and at which we have done conspicuously well. Especially in respect of the Paralympics, it is extraordinary that the Home Secretary should say that it is beyond his ability to help the disabled.

On 11 June, the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) sought to suggest that I and my colleagues who were talking about the disabled were in some way hiding our support for various amendments—support that we had always made quite clear—behind the cause of the disabled. I resent that suggestion. The hon. Gentleman is not in his place at the moment, but he was here earlier.

I stress that many of us have been working hard for disabled sportspeople—not only those involved in shooting—for many years. We have every right to champion the cause of disabled shooters and the cause of those who have practised for many years.

8.30 pm

Many people in my constituency have been involved in shooting at the very highest level. They have cabinets full of trophies which they have won representing their country. As my right hon. and hon. Friends have said, many months and years of practice go into winning those trophies, and I suggest that the Home Secretary seriously reconsiders the matter. I hope that he will accept the new clauses, but, if he cannot go that far, I hope that he will at least confirm that he is prepared to reconsider before the Bill goes to another place.

[Mr. Nick Hawkins]

In pursuance of his promise to me on 11 June, I hope that the Home Secretary will consider the position of Bisley. Sadly, Britain has lost its historic standing in many sports, although we hope that we are regaining it in, for example, cricket at the moment. However, there is no doubt that Bisley is regarded worldwide as the pre-eminent centre of shooting, a sport in which we have an extremely successful record. It is not impossible for the Government to make exceptions, either by accepting the new clauses now or by accepting similar proposals in another place, and to allow competitive pistol shooting, and shooting for the disabled, to continue.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Like my right hon. and hon. Friends, I have high hopes that as the Home Secretary is answering this debate it means that the Government are taking the two new clauses seriously.

Mr. Maclean: He is a reasonable man.

Mr. Chope: He has proved on a number of occasions that he is a reasonable man, as my right hon. Friend says.

On Second Reading, the Home Secretary said that it would be possible for pistol shooting competitions to be held within the confines of the Commonwealth games. If public safety can be secured by arrangements that enable pistol shooters from more than 50 Commonwealth countries to come to Manchester and use their pistols in competition, why cannot arrangements be made for British pistol shooters to practise their sport in a centre of excellence with public safety being secured at the same time?

To get to the bottom of the Government's argument, I tabled a question to find out what detailed arrangements were being planned by the Government in connection with the Commonwealth games in Manchester in 2002. I asked the Home Secretary

"to place in the Library a draft of the authority and the conditions attached thereto which he intends to grant under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968 in respect of competitors in pistol shooting events at the Commonwealth Games".

I am sorry to have to tell the House that the Minister of State declined to do so. In so doing, he said:

"Any authority to be issued to competitors for the pistol shooting events . . . will be a matter for the Secretary of State".

which we know. He continued:

"the Secretary of State can attach any conditions which he considers necessary to ensure that public safety or the peace is not endangered. It is . . . for the Secretary of State to decide the appropriate drafting and conditions".

We understand that, but if the Home Secretary can be so sure that it will be possible to make those necessary arrangements for the Manchester games, why can he not place in the Library a draft of those arrangements? I am not asking for the final version—only for a draft of how he thinks the arrangements will work in practice.

Fifty nations will be represented at the Commonwealth games, at which pistol shooting is the third most popular sport. People will attend from the UK, but also from parts within the UK, such as Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man. What arrangements will be made to ensure public safety, given that that is the absolute which the Home Secretary is holding up to us? Has he thought through how pubic safety will be secured in those circumstances? If so—I hope that he has—why will he not let us know what those detailed arrangements are? We could then compare the practicalities of arrangements proposed for the Commonwealth games with the proposals in new clauses 3 and 4.

I also received a disappointing reply from the Minister of State when I asked whether competitors from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would be able to use pistols

"in their ownership which are lawfully held overseas so that they can participate in the games on equal terms with nationals from other countries."

Again, it is a straightforward question, but the Minister of State responded:

"The Government appreciate the need for the planning of the games to take place well in advance and we intend to discuss the matter with all interested parties. It is too early to grant section 5 authority at this stage. However, all competitors from the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, will be eligible to be considered nearer the time."—[*Official Report*, 16 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. *3-4*.]

I hope that they are not intended to be the weasel words that they might seem to those of a more sceptical disposition than I.

I hope that the Minister of State and the Home Secretary will make it possible for British competitors, who use and practise with pistols that are lawfully held overseas, to bring those pistols here and participate in the games on equal terms with nationals from other countries. If not, I despair. It raises the serious problem of whether this country will ever be able to command the support of other countries on the Olympic games or Commonwealth games committee if we are not able to guarantee the future of pistol shooting events.

Originally, we were not going to have pistol shooting in Manchester, but, after pressure was put on the Manchester organisers, it was agreed that there would be. It is such a popular sport in the Commonwealth games that any country that has no proper arrangements for it is unlikely to enjoy the support of other Commonwealth countries in seeking designation to host the Commonwealth games.

Mr. Colvin: Unlike me, my hon. Friend is a lawyer. We have been discussing the rights of minorities and I know that my hon. Friend has made a study of the European convention on human rights. I ask him, as I asked the Home Secretary on Second Reading, whether in his view people deprived of the liberty to shoot have the right to appeal to the European Court against this infringement of their civil rights.

Mr. Chope: I do not give any advice as a lawyer these days. Like me, the Home Secretary is a proud member of the Inner Temple, but we certainly do not give advice—at least not for free—in this House. However, I do know that members of the Christchurch gun club have high expectations of being able to take some of these arguments to the European Court of Human Rights. I do not know whether they will be successful, but it is an indication of their despair that they feel that they will be forced down that path.

New clause 4 deals with shooting for the disabled, which is a sport that was developed by our country and something of which we should be proud. I hope that the Government's sensitivity towards those least able to help

themselves will lead them to accept the new clause. What the disabled can achieve by pistol shooting differs greatly from what others can achieve. It is said by the Government, with some justification, that ordinary people involved in pistol shooting can transfer their activities to rifle, shotgun or clay pigeon shooting; for a disabled person, however, such a transfer is not possible because of the recoil and power of those larger guns. That is why pistol shooting for people in wheelchairs has become such a popular sport. Mr. Holdaway, who is a prominent member of the Christchurch gun club, writes that pistol shooting

"is a sport almost anybody can compete in on equal terms. This is particularly true of pistol shooting as rifles and shotguns can have intimidating levels of recoil. Women can compete against men as can youngsters. A few disabled people with limited upper body strength may be unable to shoot, but being in a wheelchair is no disadvantage in many disciplines. .22 calibre events are especially suitable."

I hope that the Government will take the new clauses seriously. If they fail to do so, I have every confidence that the debate in another place will ensure that the new clauses are eventually put on the statute book.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): First, I say to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) and to other right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken this evening that I take this matter very seriously indeed. It may be that we have come to different conclusions—I shall try to explain why that may be inevitable in this case—but I do not regard what we are doing here as a light matter. On Second Reading, I said that the House has

"to be very careful before we use our power to prohibit actions that were previously lawful and involved no criminal intent. Simple disapproval can never be a ground alone for prohibition."—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 1164.]

I have repeated that statement, because it is applicable to today's debate and will be applicable to future debates. It is a principle to which I and the Government of which I am a member seek to work whenever we address the difficult questions of balancing the personal liberty of law-abiding people against wider issues of public safety.

My second preliminary remark is in answer to the intervention by the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) about the European convention on human rights, which is a matter that we have considered both in opposition and in government. It was raised initially—and somewhat ironically—by the former hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West, Nicholas Budgen, who could not normally get the word "European" out of his mouth without spitting about it. He had worked out that the European convention on human rights had a different—and in his view far more honourable—provenance than the treaty of Rome. It was, after all, a convention which had been developed by distinguished British lawyers, including the distinguished British lawyer who went on to become a Conservative Lord Chancellor. Mr. Budgen kept asking me during the course of the last Parliament whether shooters would be able to exercise their rights under the convention. The best advice that I have received is that neither the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 nor the Bill in any way conflicts with individuals' rights under the convention, but it is open to any British citizen to petition the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. Later this year, we shall introduce a Bill to incorporate the European convention into British law and I look forward to receiving support for that measure, not least from those who have spoken today about their rights under that convention.

I have thought carefully about this matter and I shall explain why I am not persuaded to grant the exception that is asked for. While listening to the arguments, I was struck by the fact that the main argument in favour of the exception—which would extend a right to carry on practising to the existing national squad and the 13 regional squads mentioned by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean)—was based on another exception that I have already granted. That is my difficulty. I have listened carefully to the arguments and it is for that reason that I announced on Second Reading that we would be ready to use the section 5 powers under the Firearms Act 1968 to ensure that the shooting competitions at the Commonwealth games could go ahead. I believe that we were right to do so, even though it creates a patent anomaly, as was said on Second Reading. It is an anomaly, but we should be able to arrive at conditions which assure public safety and ensure that those games can go ahead.

That exception having been made, it is now suggested that I must make another exception—that British shooters should be allowed to train before that competition so that they can compete. The problem with new clause 3 is that it does not properly define which members would be members of national squads.

The competition will be in five years' time. If there were to be a real prospect of British shooters being able to participate in that competition, the next argument would be, logically, that we should ensure that there is a through-put of people who would be available in five years' time to compete. The next question would be why we are excluding some people and not others. That is one reason why I am not persuaded of the case for the new clause.

8.45 pm

Given the shooting competitions that will take place at the Commonwealth games and under the aegis of the Olympic games and the Paralympic games, it is striking—and I think not properly appreciated by hon. Members or the public—that, even after the Bill is passed, British residents will be able to train and compete in the vast majority of Commonwealth games and Olympic shooting disciplines.

To listen to the debate and the remarks of, for example, the right hon. Member for Penrith and the Border, one might be forgiven for believing that, in his words, the sport "will be destroyed." Yes, the sport of target shooting with pistols will end as a result of the Bill's passage. If that is what the right hon. Gentleman meant, he is right, but the implication of some of the less precise remarks that have been made is that shooting as a sport will be destroyed by the Bill. It will not.

Quite a lot of British people, and many Labour Members, are worried about public safety. The Bill and the 1997 Act will have the effect of removing 200,000 handguns from circulation, but that will leave at least another 200,000 rifles and high-powered air weapons. Some of my right hon. and hon. Friends may say that that means that there remains a public safety issue.

In any case, those 200,000 rifles and high-powered air weapons will exist and most of them are held not to carry out any occupational function, such as in agriculture,

[Mr. Jack Straw]

but for sporting purposes. I well understand that some weapons are held for occupational reasons, but most are held for sporting purposes. In addition, there are certificates relating to 1.3 million shotguns. So although the Bill will eliminate the holding of pistols in general civilian use, it will not eliminate firearms.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman is really addressing the argument, but it must be apparent to—or at least dawning on—him that the argument is a question not of an anomaly, but of a judgment. It is a question of deciding where to draw the line and what is necessary for the protection of public safety.

We are discussing a very small number of pistols. We had a debate about single-shot pistols, which I invite the right hon. Gentleman to keep in mind, because one appreciates that a multi-shot pistol is more dangerous, but we are trying to find a way of keeping open a sport practised by legitimate sportsmen under highly controlled conditions. He is making the case against his existing judgment, by pointing out that there are 200,000 rifles and 1.3 million shotguns, which are as lethal as—probably rather more lethal than—these pistols, quite apart from the ease of getting them from France and the existence of illegal ones. I am fascinated to know how the right hon. Gentleman convinces himself.

Mr. Straw: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to say that it comes down to a judgment of where to draw the line. A rifle may be more powerful than a pistol. Lord Cullen and the former Government were of the view that a pistol is more dangerous because it is more easily concealed; and a multi-shot pistol can be fired more rapidly than the rifles which, these days, are lawfully certified. To those who say that we have some sort of ideological fixation against the use of firearms, I say: look at the facts. There will still be 1.5 million lawfully licensed firearms in this country after the passage of the Bill. Some of my hon. Friends might want to criticise me for allowing that to continue, but it hardly argues for a fixation on our part.

I want to set out the facts about the number of competitions in which British residents will still be able to compete even after the passage of the Bill. There are 15 shooting competitions in the Olympics. British participation will be adversely affected by the Bill in respect of just three of them. British sportsmen and women will still be able to compete in 12 competitions, involving air rifles and pistols, ordinary rifles and shotguns for clay pigeon shooting.

The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border referred to the fact that shooting was one of the original disciplines in the Olympics, and he was right about that. But it is also interesting to note that of all the Olympic sports, shooting is the only one for which the number of events that have been discontinued greatly outnumbers the ones currently held. The history of these events is a history of changing perceptions of public safety.

There was a time when there was a competition in the Olympics with duelling pistols. I suspect that as duelling went out of fashion so it was felt by the organisers of the Olympics that such a competition might offend some more sensitive members of the public. There was also a competition for miniature rifles—highly dangerous weapons. I know that animal rights are much on the minds of my hon. Friends at the moment. There used to be a competition of live pigeon shooting. That, too, has been abandoned by the Olympics. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border may have some experience of trying to shoot live pigeons; he suggests that trying to obtain a score at all may have been problematic.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): One of the themes of this interesting debate has been that it is not about the moral high ground: it is about the practical consequences for public safety. Yet here is the right hon. Gentleman lecturing the Committee—I fully understand his point—on the very moral issues which we have been told time and again are not the motivating force behind the legislation. Is there not some confusion here?

Mr. Straw: The word "moral" has not passed my lips. Where to draw the line is a practical, not a moral issue. For me, the only moral issue is securing the right balance between people's right to engage in a sport and the need for public safety.

Mr. Beith: Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that under the arrangements that he proposes there will be no legal bar to British competitors taking part in the Manchester Commonwealth games? If so, will he make some allowance for those competitors to arrive at the competition in a reasonable state of preparedness—even if only gained over the few weeks before the games?

Mr. Straw: I have listened carefully to the right hon. Gentleman's points. I hope that he will accept my arguments. I have thought about this a great deal, especially since it was raised in the House last week. In my judgment it will not be possible to allow an exemption which starts now and runs until 2002. As I said, because the exemption would have to run to 2002, I or any holder of my office would be under pressure to increase the number of people who might funnel their way through to become members of a national squad. If the games were to be held tomorrow, it would be a different matter, but we are speaking about an event five years away.

If there is a British team that wishes to participate in the Commonwealth games in 2002, despite the fact that there will be no possibility of practice between now and then, it will be a matter for the holder of my office to ensure that the same arrangements for training apply to them as apply to any other team participating in the Commonwealth games. I noted what the right hon. Gentleman said. Should I still hold this fine office in 2002—I will almost have beaten the record for any holder over the past 200 years—I shall bear his comments in mind.

I know that time is pressing, but important points have been raised and I want to answer them. With regard to the Paralympics, before the hon. Member for Romsey raised the matter, I was briefed to the effect that of a total of 15 events, British teams will be ruled out of just two events. The hon. Gentleman gave more up-to-date information. I understand that the Paralympic committee has removed two air weapon events and replaced them with live firing events.

That makes my point as much as the hon. Gentleman's, and shows that within the ambit of shooting competitions it is possible for the kind of events to be changed,

sometimes in response to public fashion and public pressure. I suggest that if participation by British residents in .22 live-firing competition were banned it might be possible to persuade the Paralympics to move into other events.

On the Commonwealth games, the news is even better than that in respect of the Olympics and the Paralympics. There are 28 separate shooting competitions in the Commonwealth games. Of those, British residents will be able to train and compete in 21 disciplines for rifles, air rifles, pistols and shotguns. It is five years before the Commonwealth games take place. I expect that several of the people who have represented this country so finely in pistol competitions will shift their discipline to one of the other four disciplines—rifles, air rifles, pistols and shotguns.

The passage of the Bill will mean that British participants are unable to compete in six pistol competitions. As the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) is aware, the 1997 Act for which he was responsible had the effect of rendering British participation in one Commonwealth games event impossible—that was for .32 centrefire pistols.

I have dealt with one of the claims made about the Bill, which is that it would lead to British residents being unable to train and compete in shooting disciplines. I think that I have shown that, notwithstanding the Bill, British residents will still be able to train and compete in the vast majority of events in the Olympic and Commonwealth games.

The second charge that has been made is that we would be unable to host the Commonwealth games in 2002, or the Olympics or Paralympics at some time in the future. I dealt with the matter of the Commonwealth games when I spoke in the House on Second Reading last Wednesday. I or my successor will be able to make an authorisation, subject to detailed practical conditions, under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968.

The hon. Member for Christchurch asked why my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Home Office has not been able to put in the Library of the House the detailed conditions. That is because we have not got them, but I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman to set out as far as possible the criteria that we would take into account.

With regard to the Olympics and the Paralympics, I am assured that the passage of the Bill would not prevent our hosting either of those games at some time in the future, if we were able to win that competition.

Either of the new clauses is capable of producing loopholes in the control of firearms. I have listened carefully to the arguments that have been advanced. Hon. Members who argued in favour of the new clauses will accept that I have taken their case seriously and have tried to deal with it. I am sorry to tell them, however, that, having weighed the arguments in the balance, I must ask the House to reject both new clauses.

Mr. Maclean: We have listened carefully to the Home Secretary tonight, and the difference between him and the Minister of State is obvious. When the Minister does not have a logical argument, he reverts to attacking the Opposition and to much bluff and bluster. When the Home Secretary does not have a logical argument, he reverts to ladling out the charm. The Home Secretary dispensed charm by the bucketful in his reply tonight, which leads me to conclude that he does not have a very strong argument.

9 pm

The Home Secretary is correct to say that there is a delicate balance to be struck between public safety and individual liberty. We all accept that fact. The Committee may be under the impression—perhaps Labour Back Benchers believe it—that the Home Secretary has decided that, in the interests of public safety, pistol shooting will never occur again in this country.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Hear, hear.

Mr. Maclean: The hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) is wrong. The Home Secretary has exercised his judgment and decided that pistol shooting will be allowed, under strictly controlled conditions, in this country at the Commonwealth games and that competitors from 60 foreign countries will participate. British shooters will not be able to train and shall not participate. It is not a matter of public safety. The Home Secretary cannot base his opposition to the new clause on concern about public safety. He cannot claim that public safety is paramount and absolute and say—in the nicest possible way—that he therefore cannot accept the new clause.

The Home Secretary has decided to exercise his judgment—which I think is correct—to permit shooting events to be held at the Commonwealth games. The Opposition are asking the Home Secretary not to make another exception and depart from his judgment, but to follow the same principles that he has applied in deciding to permit shooting at the Commonwealth games and allow it to take place at a designated site, such as Bisley. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) put the argument beautifully and succinctly. He said that if public safety can be secured for the shooters from 60 countries at Manchester, why can it not be allowed at a designated, secure, national site, such as Bisley, where the Home Secretary could apply the same strict section 5 guidelines? I expect the criteria that he will publish in due course to be quite draconian in order to ensure public safety, and the Opposition will accept it.

The Opposition have no option but to press new clause 3 to a Division today. The Home Secretary has been hoist by his own petard—no wonder he wants to shoot some pigeons, because they have dropped some nasty things on him—in the logic that he has tried to apply today. The Home Secretary has exercised his judgment and he will allow pistol shooting to take place in Britain in a few years. In this new clause, we ask him to exercise the same judgment and permit it to take place under the same secure conditions for British as for foreign shooters.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 159, Noes 328.

Division No. 35] **[9.2 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard *(Sheffld Hallam)*	Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Amess, David	Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael	Baldry, Tony
Arbuthnot, James	Beith, Rt Hon A J

Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Mactaggart, Fiona
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marek, Dr John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merchant, Piers
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Opik, Lembit
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro & St Austell)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willis, Phil
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Simon Burns and
Mr. Tim Boswell.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham *(Nottingham N)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne *(Aberd'n S)*
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Robert
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne (C'bridge)
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain *(Hammersmith & Fulham)*
Colman, Anthony *(Putney)*
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Curtis–Thomas, Ms Clare
Dafis, Cynog
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Ms Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Ms Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Eliman, Ms Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael John *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia

Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Ms Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Miss Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Tessa
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony (Manchester C)
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Ms Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Ms Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Ms Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Oiner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Ms Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Ms Jacqui (Redditch)
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steven
White, Brian
Whitehead, Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Dr Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wright, Tony *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. David Clelland.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr. Maclean: On a point of order, Mr. Martin. As you know, and as the Government know, we could force new clause 4 to a vote. The Opposition wish to make it absolutely clear that we support the principle and the intention behind the new clause, but, as it is clear that the Government are unwilling to listen, and as they have voted down new clause 3, we shall not take up the time of the House with an unnecessary Division—*[Interruption.]* Unless Government Members tempt us, and make us wish to do so, we shall not take time away from Third Reading. However, the Opposition will return to the important content of new clause 4 in another place.

Schedule agreed to.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Order for Third Reading read.

9.18 pm

Mr. Michael: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

My party's manifesto made a clear commitment to a free vote on a total ban on handguns. We have delivered on that commitment, and a free vote on Second Reading produced a resounding majority of 203 in favour of an extension to the ban. That is a crystal clear message from the House. We want the ban on small-calibre pistols to be introduced well before the end of the year and I hope that that will prove possible.

No point of principle or of detail on this short Bill has not been given a full airing on Second Reading and in subsequent debates on amendments and new clauses. We have made the case, we have won the argument and there can be no doubt of our intensions. We have dealt with the unfinished business that remained after the previous Government failed to allow a free vote on a complete ban on handguns. The Bill should now go to the other place for a swift passage into law. I believe that that is not only the will of the vast majority of hon. Members, but it has

[Mr. Michael]

the public's support as shown in the general election and through expressions of public opinion before and since. I commend the Bill to the House.

9.20 pm

Mr. Howard: We made our attitude to the Bill clear on Second Reading, and nothing that the Government said then or in Committee has led us to revise it. The Bill is a petty and vindictive measure, and its proposals are unnecessary, unfair and expensive.

As I said on 11 June, we believe that the Government must always present a clear justification whenever they propose to intervene in the otherwise lawful habits of law-abiding citizens. The principle of individual liberties should dictate that Governments should always take into account the views of minorities and minority interests. As the Bill has gone through its stages in the House, the Government have done neither. Indeed, Ministers have applied a steamroller approach to any reasoned arguments or suggestions put by right hon. and hon. Members.

The case put by my right hon. and hon. Friends and others that provision should be made to enable Olympic and Commonwealth competitors to compete has gone unanswered. The case put by my right hon. and hon. Friends and others that due consideration should be given to disabled shooters has gone unanswered. The Government's only response has been that the Bill is in the interests of public safety, but they have not produced any conclusive evidence to justify that view.

The proposal to ban the controlled and limited use of .22 target pistols is unnecessary. The controls that we put in place earlier this year and which have yet to be implemented would have ensured that the public were protected. They would allow not unrestricted use of .22 calibre pistols but only limited use in clubs that police were satisfied met the highest security criteria. The owners of those weapons would even be prohibited from taking them out of a club. The police would have to be alerted as a matter of routine whenever a .22 pistol was removed from a club, be it for competition or repair.

The Government want to go further. They argue that a total ban is a logical extension of the 1997 Act. The Minister of State said that the difference is not one of principle. But the fact is that the principle and motivation for a total ban are different from our proposals. Our guiding principle was to protect the public. We felt that we could do that without obliterating a long-established sport invented by Britain, enjoyed by many and at which we do well. The Government do not share that principle. That is why the Bill is unfair.

The 1997 Act would have allowed British citizens to continue to represent their country on the international stage in .22 target pistol events recognised by the Olympic committee. Over the past 10 years, Britain has won 23 medals in Commonwealth .22 competitions. The Bill will make us virtually unique, as our citizens will no longer be able to take part in international competitions.

The 1997 Act would also have allowed disabled people to continue to participate in a sport which they not only enjoy, but which the British Paraplegic Shooting Association has said is useful as

"a rehabilitation means to help with balance and confidence, primarily in the use of a wheelchair and sport."

It believes that it provides disabled people

"with a better quality of life and respect for themselves as disabled people in an able-bodied world."

We tried to introduce an element of fairness into the Bill in new clauses 3 and 4. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) explained, the new clauses would have allowed national competition shooters recognised by the national bodies that select for international competitions to continue to train at centres designated by the Home Secretary. Our proposal for designated centres would have enabled Britain to continue to compete in a major Olympic sport.

We also proposed, in new clause 4, that physically disabled shooters be exempt from the total ban and be allowed to continue their sport at centres designated by the Home Secretary, and, indeed, to continue to represent their country at international competitions. The Government's decision to oppose the new clause will be greeted with much sadness by law-abiding disabled shooters who pose no threat to the public.

The Bill is also expensive. I said on Second Reading that Opposition Members would not begrudge the money if the consequences would really lead to increased protection for the public and if the Government could provide a clear justification for a total ban on handguns. They have not even begun to do so. They have calculated that the cost of compensating the owners of .22 handguns for the loss of their weapons and accessories would run to more than £30 million. Ministers have refused to tell us where the Government intend to find the money. Which Home Office budget will suffer? Will spending on closed circuit television or the police be sacrificed to compensate law-abiding owners of low-calibre handguns? Moreover, as we have heard today, the Government's estimates do not tell the whole story. The Bill goes much further than the 1997 Act: as has already been acknowledged, it would kill off pistol shooting.

During the passage of the Bill that became the 1997 Act, we decided against compensating gun clubs for the impact of the ban on higher-calibre guns. An important justification for that view was the fact that shooters of high-calibre pistols could convert to .22s and continue to enjoy their sport. Under this Bill, that option would be denied to them, and many gun clubs would be made unviable. Associations that are—in the main—non profit-making would have to close and their owners or trustees could be faced with heavy liabilities.

I give the example of the 10th battalion of the Suffolk Home Guard rifle and pistol club, founded when the Government stood the home guard down but instructed it to establish ranges to which the public were to be admitted. The battalion did so, on rented land. It built a clubhouse and raised money by its own efforts. In February 1996, just a few weeks before the tragedy of Dunblane, it bought the land. It managed that with the help of money from the Sports Council, the local district council and the National Rifle Association. The land is owned subject to covenant, so it can be used only as a shooting range. A £15,900 grant from the Sports Council is subject to the condition that the club should continue to function for 10 years. Then there is the matter of a loan of £6,000. None of that is under the control of the trustees of the club, yet each of the four trustees will be held personally liable for a quarter of any debts on the winding up of the club.

The Opposition believe that, given the extent of the Bill and its departure from the principles of the 1997 Act, the issue of compensation should be revisited. Naturally, we hope that as many clubs as possible will be able to survive, but clubs that are forced to close as a result of the circumstances created by the total ban on handguns should be compensated.

The Government have completely failed to justify the need for the Bill, which clearly interferes with the liberty of thousands of law-abiding individuals. In their attempts to give reasons for the Bill, Ministers have rarely ventured beyond soundbites. The Bill is an example of the Government's weakness for gesture politics. It is unnecessary and unfair, and that is why we will oppose it.

9.28 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this important debate.

It is a tradition of the House that maiden speeches should be fairly uncontroversial, and I respect that tradition, although I am not sure that it is possible to abide by it completely in a debate such as this. Not only is the tradition of argument and debate in the House honourable in itself, but I follow a long line of Warrington Members who were certainly not afraid to speak their minds.

The House will know that I have the honour of succeeding Doug Hoyle. Doug was an excellent Member of Parliament, first for Warrington and then for the new seat of Warrington, North. He was extremely active, extremely able and very well liked by his constituents, to whom he was universally known by his first name long before such things became fashionable at Cabinet level. He was also a great supporter of Warrington rugby league football club and ended his career with the supporters singing "There is only one Dougie Hoyle" around the ground.

Doug Hoyle was robust in the defence of his constituency. In his first speech in the House as the Member for Warrington, North, he was involved in what I think in these days of uncontroversial politics would be described as an interesting exchange of views with the then Secretary of State for Employment, now Lord Tebbit. No doubt they will continue the conversation elsewhere.

As I have said, Doug Hoyle followed a long Warrington tradition. I have looked at the maiden speeches of my predecessors and they make it clear that they certainly did not shy away from saying what they thought. My predecessors included Tom Williams and, of course, Edith Summerskill who was the first woman to represent a Warrington constituency and whom no one could describe as a shrinking violet.

To read those speeches is to realise how much has changed—and how little. The language may be different, but the preoccupations of my predecessors are shared by many of us today. They spoke of a need for better housing, for more national health service beds and, in one case, even of the need to preserve water supplies. Perhaps that is a salutary reminder to us all and especially to my hon. Friends of how much work still needs to be done. What comes through most of all from those speeches is a burning hatred of injustice and a desire to represent the constituency well. It is a privilege to follow in their footsteps.

I confess that I speak with some relief because for my first few weeks in the House I became uncertain about whether I would ever be able to speak in the House at all. I did not receive copies of the Labour whip and I began to wonder what dreadful breach of the disciplinary code I had managed to commit before I got here. I carefully scrutinised my election address and reviewed my whole campaign, and I can honestly say, unlike some hon. Members, that the word "socialism" did not get past my agent's eagle eye.

After consulting the Millbank computer, I think that it was probably a mistake to allow in my office a poster that stated, "Join dangly earrings for Labour" after a certain dress code appeared in *The Guardian*. My most heinous offence was probably committed on a very wet day in Warrington when my campaign team, having been soaked to the skin four times, ended the evening completely drenched and with their umbrellas turned inside out, walking along a Warrington street and singing, "Always look on the bright side of life." Therefore, I plead guilty to enjoying the election campaign. I can only say in mitigation that what seems to outsiders to be frivolity is to Warringtonians a demonstration of resistance.

In my constituency, people have demonstrated time and again their ability to bounce back and even to recover from tragedy. The people of Warrington are among the friendliest, most welcoming people that one could encounter. We brew excellent beer at Burtonwood, and people take part in a wide range of charitable and leisure pursuits, which include the little-known feat of recently breaking the world line dancing record.

Although many of our traditional industries have disappeared, people have fought back to attract new jobs based on the excellent skills of our work force, our superb industrial sites and our communications facilities, which are second to none. Most of all, when Warrington was visited by the appalling tragedy of the Warrington bombing its people responded not with hatred and bitterness but with a movement to promote peace and reconciliation. There is no better measure of the character of my constituents than that. They are people whom any hon. Member would be proud to represent.

Pride in one's constituency is not enough. The people of Warrington, North sent me here not just to say nice things about them, pleasurable though that may be, but to make changes. Time and again during the election campaign, people said to me that one of the things that most worried them was the gun culture and the private ownership of handguns. I appreciate the points that have been made by hon. Members who say that, in passing the Bill, we are restricting the rights of many law-abiding gun owners and are interfering with their liberty to practise their sport. Of course we are, but we restrict people's individual liberties on many occasions when we believe that it is for the greater public good. We do not allow people to drive on whichever side of the road they like or to build wherever they like. How much more important, then, is it to consider that possibility when we deal with guns?

I am convinced by the arguments, particularly that relating to .22 pistols, because those weapons are small, lethal and deadly. They are the weapons that killed Robert Kennedy and Yitzhak Rabin. I am convinced also because no system of regulation and control, however draconian, can ever be 100 per cent. foolproof and if we allow these weapons to remain in private hands, it will be only a

[Helen Jones]

matter of time before somehow, somewhere they fall into the wrong hands. As has been said many times in the House, but it bears repeating, the massacres at Hungerford and at Dunblane were carried out with legally held weapons. I am convinced, too, by the correlation shown in the Home Office statistics between the legal ownership of handguns and the number of firearm homicides. That has led me to believe sincerely that the more of these weapons we take out of circulation, the better it will be.

I said earlier that I represent a constituency which knows about senseless and random violence. It is because of that that we sympathise with the people who have suffered elsewhere from our failure to control firearms. The time has come to take another step. The onus is on the people who would keep these weapons to make their case. I do not believe that I have heard that case made convincingly tonight because the right to practise a sport always has to come second to the right to protect life. I say that sincerely not just as an hon. Member, but as the mother of a young child, and I believe that I speak for many more mothers of young children. My son was eight years old this week. The best present that we could give him and his generation is to start to control the gun culture in which they are growing up. The Bill is a step on the road to that and I commend it to the House.

9.37 pm

Mr. Hancock: This debate has been interesting for a number of reasons, not least the spawning of such memorable and impressive maiden speeches. The House has been privileged to hear yet another tonight from the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones), who is to be congratulated not only on talking so eloquently about her constituency and predecessors, but on the fine way in which she demonstrated her support for the Bill. I offer her my heartiest congratulations on that speech and my best wishes for her time in the House.

I thought that it was a little sad and slightly shabby of the former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), to talk in the way he did about the Bill. He suggested that the Bill had been steamrollered through. I have sat through most of the discussions on it. I have yet to think of a single Member on the Opposition or Government Benches who wanted to speak and was denied the opportunity on Second Reading, in Committee or indeed, I expect, on Third Reading, so to suggest that the Bill has been steamrollered through is an exaggeration.

The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe forgot to mention the part that he played in nursing the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 through the House, when he denied hon. Members the opportunity of a free vote, which would have brought into being the very thing that we are discussing tonight. Had there been a free vote on that occasion, we would not have sat through these proceedings in the past week or so. There would now have been a law, the compensation would have been dealt with and gun owners, clubs and everyone else would have been well aware of what was going to happen. There cannot be anyone in the country who, after the Dunblane massacre, seriously believed that there would not be significant changes.

It was also obvious to everyone—except, perhaps, some Conservative Members—that nothing short of a total ban would be acceptable to the overwhelming majority of British people. To satisfy the undoubted public demand for Parliament to take action, innocent people have to suffer—not innocent young children being denied the opportunity to grow up, but gun owners and sportsmen being denied the opportunity to pursue a sport. Yet it is not a sport which cannot change and adapt so that those sportsmen can fire other weapons; they are being denied the opportunity to fire specific guns.

Time and again, the Home Secretary and the Minister have demonstrated conclusively that there is an element of versatility not only among those who want to shoot, but among the organisations that stage events for shooters. The Olympic games, the Commonwealth games and the national championships have changed many times to take account of changes in gun fashion and the sort of events in which people want to participate.

The Bill is not the end of participation in shooting sports. It is not the end for those who, unfortunately, are disabled and who have chosen shooting as part of their therapy to help them gain their true potential. There will be opportunities for them to adapt and to take on other shooting pursuits, if that is what they want. It is not the end of the world. It will not stop this country staging the Commonwealth games in Manchester. It will not prevent us from making a bid for the Olympic games. Over the past couple of weeks, the Home Secretary, the Minister and many other hon. Members have demonstrated beyond refute that those events will be staged and that the United Kingdom will continue to attract them.

The House has overwhelmingly responded to what the public demanded after Dunblane, and has done so mindful of the consequences. No one has hidden behind the consequences; indeed, most of us accept the consequences. We feel desperately sorry for those who will be disadvantaged by the Bill, but it was inevitable that action would be taken and that people would suffer. I do not think that anyone who has spoken in favour of the Bill has gloated about it—most people are sad that law-abiding citizens will not be able to continue with a pursuit that many of them have followed for many years. However, it was an inevitable consequence and, from time to time, the House must accept that it is the right price to pay to provide the sort of legislation that the country needs.

There is no place to hide on this issue. Certainly, the Home Secretary has not tried to hide. The Minister has tried, to the best of his ability, to answer every intervention from those who criticise the Bill. I am delighted to say that, like the Minister, I speak on behalf of my colleagues in saying that there will be a free vote tonight—a free vote expressed by democratically elected Members of Parliament, just a few weeks after the general election.

Conservative Members showed cynical contempt for the House and the election when they suggested that the Bill would be given a rough ride and possibly overturned in the other place. I hope that that will not happen. If it did, it would be a total injustice in view of the result of the election on 1 May. It is obvious that many people who voted knew that a change of Government would mean tougher gun laws. I do not believe that there is a peer of the realm who could claim that he was not aware of that inevitability.

For Conservative Members to threaten that their colleagues in the other place might ambush and overturn the Bill shows a cynical disregard for the democratic

processes. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry that Conservative Members take offence at that, but at least two of them said that that would happen. I am passionately in favour of the Bill and I am disappointed that they should take that attitude. I hope that at the end of the debate we give the Bill an overwhelming vote of support and that our colleagues in the other place will take note of that and act accordingly.

9.44 pm

Mr. Thomas Graham (West Renfrewshire): I am absolutely delighted that we are having the Third Reading of the Bill and that we will vote to abolish handguns. I remember, not long ago, meeting John Crozier, a father who lost a child at Dunblane, and I have met other folk from Dunblane. It was one of the saddest and most tragic experiences of my life. I remember the feeling in Scotland when the Dunblane disaster happened. The House should not forget our responsibility to those children, and we should act to abolish handguns. We should also ensure that criminals and people who have said that they will go underground and continue to shoot will be punished as severely as possible.

I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) in his place tonight. I hope that he will dissociate himself from the remarks made by his party's candidate in my constituency during the election. The candidate said that I did not vote to ban handguns in Scotland. I voted to ban handguns in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales. I say emphatically that no one can say that I am not determined in my opposition to handguns and my support for their abolition.

Since the last time I spoke on the issue, I, like many hon. Members, have been vilified for not supporting the gun lobby. I have seen an article put out by the field sports supporters that says that they should get rid of Tommy Graham, because I had a majority of only 1,700. They had a big poster saying, "Get shot of him." That is a tragic and savage thing to say about anyone in the current climate, because it almost encourages terrorism. I tell those people that I am back with an 8,000 majority and I am as determined as anyone to see the end of handguns in people's pockets.

I have heard arguments tonight about sport. Every man and woman in the country should sacrifice something to ensure that there is no repeat of what happened in Dunblane and in other parts of the world. The Bill is a step in the right direction to ensure that there are no guns in the hands of fools, vagabonds and criminals. We should take the guns out of circulation and destroy them. The Bill will achieve that.

People have talked about medals—gold, silver and bronze. What sort of medal has been given to the kids who died at Dunblane? There is no medal for them. I hope that there is a place in heaven for all of them—I am sure there will be. Folk such as Tom Hamilton have denied the pleasure of the sport to people. I am not interested in gold medals.

Do not give me the patter that I have heard tonight about the disabled. The previous Government had opportunities to support the disabled. They rejected those opportunities, so the Tories should not weep tonight. I have been a defender of the rights of the disabled for years and years and will continue to be. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) is right to say that disabled folk will be able to take up some other sports or some other form of shooting. The argument about the disabled does not wash with me and the rest of the country.

The nation has suffered terribly and tragically over Dunblane, but we can never suffer the way that the families involved have suffered—not in a million years. We must listen to the people of Britain who have told us that they want rid of the guns. They do not want any more Dunblanes, and they do not want the Tommy Hamiltons of this world to have access to guns. Today, I will be proud to walk into the Lobby to vote against what the Opposition are trying to force on us. The public do not want what the Opposition are proposing, because they do not want anyone to have a handgun.

I have never heard such a fine maiden speech as that made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones). It was one of the finest maiden speeches ever made in the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan) and I were saying that we have never heard such a beautiful speech; it was so well made. I hope that she was absolutely right and that the House will give her son, and all the other children in the United Kingdom, the biggest birthday present ever. I congratulate her from the bottom of my heart on her superb speech and its great ending. Let us pass the Bill tonight with a thumping majority.

9.50 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): I welcome the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones), who has been elected to the House with a hard act to follow, because Doug Hoyle was a very effective and popular hon. Member. He was also the winner of a celebrated by-election, in which Lord Jenkins had difficulties not only of pronunciation but with Doug Hoyle. She obviously follows very much in the Doug Hoyle tradition.

The hon. Lady also has courage, because she told a joke about the Millbank computer. She was fortunate that the Minister without Portfolio had left the Chamber by that time. None the less, I applaud her courage in telling such a joke. More to the point, she spoke very effectively and with great knowledge and commitment to her constituency. She also spoke without notes. In our own maiden speeches, many hon. Members probably relied on the notes that we had copiously copied down. She had the poise and confidence not to do so. It was a very effective speech, and I look forward to hearing many more speeches by her.

The shadow Home Secretary described the Bill as petty and vindictive, and he said that it had been steamrollered through the House. He was wrong on all counts. The Bill is not petty, because it deals with a subject of great and substantial importance. It is also not vindictive, and I do not think that anyone could argue that it has been proposed in a vindictive manner. The attitude of Ministers has been one of more in sorrow than in anger, and one of deep responsibility and regret that such action must be taken. They have shown public responsibility in the manner in which the Bill was introduced.

As for steamrollering the Bill through the House, the shadow Home Secretary seems to be suffering from a short memory as well as a deficiency of votes in the Tory leadership contest. He was well known for steamrollering

[Mr. Alex Salmond]

legislation, particularly earlier in the year, when he imposed a three-line Whip on the previous Government's Bill dealing with the very same issue and refused to allow a free vote—a vote of conscience—on a total ban on handguns. He now seems to be in a particularly poor position to complain about anyone else steamrollering.

As hon. Members have said, the time allowed for debate has been adequate. I do not think that any hon. Member has felt constrained in their remarks, and the shadow Home Secretary's charge is unfair. Given that I do not have many complimentary remarks to make about the Government's entire range of legislation, I should say that I very much welcome their move to fulfil an election commitment that was shared both by the new Labour party and by the Scottish National party.

The Bill is much more logical and complete than the earlier legislation proposed by the Conservative Administration. The loophole, illogicality and irrationality of allowing .22 weapons to continue to be used, albeit in gun clubs, but banning every other type of handgun was never satisfactorily dealt with. As hon. Members have said, on many occasions .22 weapons have proved themselves as dangerous and deadly as handguns of a higher calibre. That was the type of weapon used to kill Bobby Kennedy and in the attempt on the life of President Reagan. In the United States, such weapons are often referred to as "Saturday night specials".

The Cullen report stated:

"In terms of pure precision the .22 calibre was capable of inherent accuracy beyond the skill of the shooter. Whether high accuracy is obtained depends on the quality of the particular gun, the quality of the ammunition and the skills of the shooter. The .22 rimfire represented the highest precision cartridge which was available. It was highly evolved."

Lord Cullen could not see the case for separating the .22 from higher-calibre weapons; nor has anyone effectively made that case throughout the controversy surrounding the banning of handguns. It was on that illogicality that the previous legislation failed the test and failed the challenge of Dunblane and, indeed, of Hungerford.

I remind the House of the gun lobby's own judgment on the weaknesses of the storage proposal in the previous legislation. In its evidence to Lord Cullen, the British Shooting Sports Council said:

"No matter what system of checks and paperwork is maintained in such circumstances, it would be a simple matter indeed for a shooter intent on recovering his gun to enter a competition, provide evidence to his club secretary that he had done so, recover possession of the complete gun together with ammunition for it, and perpetrate an outrage."

The BSSC was arguing against club storage at that stage. It felt that that was what it had to resist because it believed that Cullen would move to club storage. However, the logic of the argument does not depend on the circumstances in which it is being argued, and the argument against building caches of guns in gun clubs is the same, regardless of the legislation before us. That is the reason why we should move forward and should ask the many decent, law-abiding gun owners to sacrifice one part of their leisure time activities for the greater good of society as a whole.

We have heard a great deal about the Commonwealth and Olympic games. I know that the Home Secretary has in all good faith said that those games can still take place in the United Kingdom, but I would rather see deployed the argument that it is perhaps time—or past time—that we should be telling the Olympic Games Committee and the Commonwealth Games Federation that handgun competitions do not have a place in an international athletic and sporting competition, that many tens of millions of children across the world look to these competitions and their participants, and that such competitions perhaps reinforce the gun culture about which many of complain so often. Perhaps the argument against such events taking place at the Commonwealth and Olympic games should now be articulated—we should move on.

I will be supporting the Bill, as will the Scottish National party. I wish it well in the remainder of its proceedings in another place. It would be incredible if it were ambushed and bushwhacked there. That would be a rank defiance of the clearly expressed public opinion. To use a phrase from another debate, it is the "settled will" of the people that effective action should be taken against handguns. A popular decision has been taken to move against the gun culture. While neither this nor the previous legislation can be said to render impossible another outrage like Hungerford or Dunblane, I think that the Bill reduces the chances of another outrage and represents a move in favour of public safety. For that reason, the Bill should certainly be supported.

The Bill deserves the support of all parties. It might not get it, but I am sure that it will receive a Third Reading with a substantial majority. I hope that it proceeds quickly onto the statute book.

9.57 pm

Mr. Colvin: I join those hon. Members who have congratulated the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) on her maiden speech which she made with great confidence and fluency and, as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) said, without notes. That is always impressive, and I look forward to hearing many more contributions from her in due course.

I also strongly endorse what the hon. Lady said about her predecessor, Mr. Doug Hoyle. On my arrival in this place, I had been told that, as a new Member, the first thing that I should do was find myself a pair. I approached three hon. Members who to me looked and sounded like Labour Members, only to discover that they were Tories. I then tried two more people who turned out to be members of the press lobby. It was only at the sixth attempt that I discovered Mr. Hoyle. On looking him up in the good book which contains hon. Members' curricula vitae, I discovered that he was the president of the trade union to which I then belonged and which was known as the Association of Secretarial, Technical and Managerial Staffs. It was a vain attempt to get the president of my union to pair with a lowly Member of Parliament, because he was already paired with someone else. I nevertheless endorse the hon. Lady's remarks about Doug, who is a great loss to the House. We always enjoyed his company and listened attentively to anything he had to say.

When the Minister of State in moving Third Reading said that the Government have won the argument and the vote, he was half right. The Government have certainly won the vote, but they have again lost the argument. There were many sensible points advanced by opponents of the Bill that should have been more carefully considered.

I would endorse what the—

It being Ten o'clock, further consideration of the Bill stood adjourned.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Firearms (Amendment) Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Jane Kennedy.]*

Question agreed to.

Question again proposed, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Mr. Colvin: As I was saying, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan drew attention to the remarks of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) about the Government steamrollering this Bill through. I agree entirely with my right hon. and learned Friend, but he is the last person who should accuse the Government of steamrollering a Bill, because when sitting on the Government Benches during the passage of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997, he was equally guilty of steamrollering through his measure. At that time, he, too, was opposed with similar vigour by some of us who knew something about shooting.

I fully understand the passion with which the hon. Member for West Renfrewshire (Mr. Graham) made his speech and the sentiments he expressed. Those feelings were shared by a great many people following the tragedy of Dunblane, which is entirely understandable. The Snowdrop campaign, which reinforced that feeling and did so much to galvanise public opinion, was certainly responsible for the way in which the public reacted to the issue of handguns.

However, the initial hostility to handguns was then tempered by the common sense of Lord Cullen's report into the tragedy. It was significant that after the report had been made public, the press had commented on it and there had been debate in both Houses of Parliament about firearms legislation, some of the opinion polls and press comments started to be tempered by a modicum of common sense. For example, in October 1996, a poll in *The Sunday Times*, while supporting the proposals in what became the 1997 Act, showed only 54 per cent. in favour of a complete ban on all handguns. By December 1996, polls conducted in response to remarks by the Duke of Edinburgh showed that a majority of the public felt that a complete ban was an overreaction which unfairly penalised law-abiding citizens. Three telephone polls published at that time showed that between 68 and 75 per cent. of people were against a complete ban. By February this year, even in Scotland, where the tragedy took place, Market Research Scotland found that 39 per cent. of Scots believed that responsible gun users were being treated unfairly because of the action of one man. We, too, must temper our passionate feelings about Dunblane with an element of common sense.

The Home Secretary has said clearly that, although he will use his section 5 powers to enable the Commonwealth games to go ahead in Manchester, one exception is enough. However, I would point out that there are already other exceptions. Athletics clubs use .32 and .38 calibre guns for starting races. Vets use such guns, as do slaughterhouses.

It was not unreasonable, therefore, to expect special exception to be made for single-shot .22 guns to be used for competition purposes. They cannot be concealed on a person, as .22s were concealed in the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy.

I believe that the House was especially interested to hear the remarks of the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) about dismantling firearms so that they may be kept in the home, avoiding the imposition of an enormous burden of financial investment on gun club security. If and when the Bill reaches the other place, the whole issue of dismantling .22 calibre weapons should be considered once more.

If the Government want suggestions as to amendments that they might introduce in the other place, I suggest that they consider including in the Bill a clause requiring that, after three years, a review be held of its provisions, including a review of the impact that they might have had on international competition shooting.

The other great injustice of the Bill, on which much has been said, is the issue of compensation. I very much hope that the Home Secretary will reconsider that matter, because, although there are provisions in the Bill for compensating people for loss of their handguns and loss of equipment, the clubs, many of which are heavily in debt as a result of the investment that they have made, and the people who have lost their busines, should be compensated as well.

There are plenty of precedents in this country for such compensation, but the Home Secretary should also consider the precedent of the Australian experience—which teaches us that, although draconian measures may be necessary, people should not be deprived of their livelihood, investment, money and jobs as a result. The Government should seriously reconsider that before proceeding with the Bill.

10.6 pm

Mr. Grieve: This has been an interesting debate and I have tried to listen carefully to the Ministers' arguments. In a way, I am grateful to the Home Secretary for saying at the outset that the Bill was introduced on its merits because it dealt with the practical. I believe that he explained that the only morality in the issue was that of trying to ensure that people were not harmed by handguns.

As we have examined more and more minute applications of the rule to individual instances, it has been interesting to note how woefully deficient the Government have been in coming up with a concrete explanation or reason justifying the outlawing—if I may use that word—of categories of handgun use. Most notably, a strange ambiguity has crept in. Ministers have argued that these are practical considerations, whereas Labour Back Benchers have come up with far more powerful arguments, on a much higher moral plane, saying why handguns must go.

The extremely powerful maiden speech by the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) introduced reasons for handgun legislation, and its specific application to .22 rounds, that have been wholly absent from the reasons that the Home Secretary and the Minister of State have advanced.

The Home Secretary has made a series of repetitions, maintaining that the .22 would introduce loopholes that might lead to risks. It has never been explained to the

[Mr. Grieve]

House how the restricted categories that we have discussed would produce those loopholes, when the mere fact that we shall also allow handguns into the country at the time of the Olympic games and Commonwealth games shows that exceptions can be created and tolerated. In that regard, the contribution of the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) to tonight's debate was far more philosophically and intellectually coherent than those of Ministers.

Instead, we have heard a whole series of arguments being wheeled out, dealing mainly with emotion—one of which, from the Home Secretary on Second Reading, greatly surprised me. We were to go along with his suggestion, he said, because it was endorsed by the Police Federation. I have spent time as a barrister prosecuting for the police, as a lay visitor to police stations, and as chairman of committees of police community consultative groups, and my admiration for the police is great. But if the Home Secretary is going to spend his time telling us to go along with things because the Police Federation want them, he will be the first Home Secretary gently to preside over leading us inexorably into a police state.

The issue before the House may ultimately be the moral issue for which the hon. Member for Warrington, North argued, but in the meantime I should point out that we live in a pluralist society—an idea to which the Home Secretary, in his civil liberties days, would often have adhered. It is certainly the view to which I adhere. Removing people's rights without good reason or cogent arguments makes for bad law—

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a child's right to life is far more important than any adult's right to use a gun, even for so-called sporting purposes?

Mr. Grieve: If the hon. Gentleman could persuade me of any linkage between the two, I would respect his argument—but I have heard nothing to persuade me of it. Instead, throughout the debate Ministers have obfuscated, trying to conceal the fact that shooters in gun clubs are a law-abiding group indulging in a recreational pursuit. Labour Back Benchers, meanwhile, tell us that for moral reasons guns must go. These are the foundations of bad law, and I am sorry that the Minister of State does not see it that way.

10.11 pm

Mr. Maclean: The House has been privileged over the week between Second and Third Readings to hear a number of excellent maiden speeches. I heartily congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) on her fluent and confident speech. It was made, as my hon. Friends have pointed out, without notes—very impressive for a maiden speaker. We look forward to more, valuable contributions from her in due course.

I hope that one day the hon. Lady will develop the splendid accent of her predecessor, whom we all thought of with great affection. The story that comes to mind about him concerns the hapless Conservative candidate from the southern counties who, a few years ago, thought he would try his hand as a candidate in Warrington. Unfortunately, he had not done all his homework. When asked by the local Conservative chairman, "What do you know about 'oyle?", he went on to give a wonderful dissertation on the benefits of North sea oil, and wondered afterwards why he was not selected for the seat. If his successor picks up his accent in due course, that will be a bonus.

We approached the Bill with deep scepticism and we are still sceptical about it. We felt that it was unnecessary, unfair and costly. As the Bill has gone through all its stages, our initial attitudes have been confirmed and hardened.

Not only is the Bill unnecessary: it is petty and vindictive. Whenever the state considers limiting the activities of its law-abiding citizens, it must have a compelling justification. The Government have come up with no such justification at any stage of the Bill's progress. They claim that a total ban on handguns would increase public safety. If that were true, we would vote for it—just as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and many other colleagues voted for the 1997 Act. That was the Act which brought about public safety and dealt with the Hamilton-Dunblane evil.

We challenged the Government to come up with evidence or valid research to back up their view that this Bill adds something in terms of public safety to what the 1997 Act achieved. They have not done so and they will not, because they cannot come up with evidence that the Bill is essential for additional public safety, following the draconian provisions in the 1997 Act.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) *rose—*

Mr. Maclean: No, I want to conclude. I know that the Home Secretary wants to speak and the whole House is waiting. The hon. Gentleman can make his own speech.

Both on Second Reading and in Committee, reasoned proposals to introduce an element of fairness—by allowing our top national competitors to continue to train and compete, or by allowing the disabled to be exempted from the ban—have been dismissed by Ministers, admittedly graciously dismissed by the Home Secretary, but dismissed all the same. The Government have closed their ears to positive suggestions that try to introduce an element of fairness. They are confident that they can deploy their army of Back-Bench Lobby fodder to ram through any proposals.

The Bill is unnecessary. The controls that we recently put in place are rigorous. Indeed, the provisions of the 1997 Act were regarded by many people as excessive when they went through. However, they would still have allowed British sportsmen to represent their country in international .22 target pistol competitions and they would still have allowed controlled and limited use of .22 handguns in clubs that met the highest security criteria.

The hon. Member for West Renfrewshire (Mr. Graham), whom I respect immensely for a variety of reasons with which I shall not burden the House, made a wonderful, impassioned speech tonight. All his remarks were relevant to the 1997 Act. That is why we put the 1997 Act through: we did not put medals in front of children's lives. If the Bill were a matter of choice between medals and children's lives, the medals would never come into the equation. Children's lives come first.

However, we believe that the 1997 Act has ensured that the likes of Hamilton and Dunblane will not happen again. The Bill does not add to the public safety imperative that we enshrined in the 1997 Act. *[Interruption.]* When the hon. Members for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) and for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) spoke on Second Reading or on Monday this week, they exposed the sham of the Labour free vote. It was a free vote in the Lobbies, but a three-line Whip on attendance. As the hon. Member for Stockton, North said, we could all read the semaphore signals by the Whips on the door, so we will take no lessons from the Government on bogus free votes in the House for them.

Regardless of the fact that the 1997 Act has not yet been implemented, the Government are determined to institute a total ban. We acknowledge that. For that reason, we tabled two new clauses in Committee. They were designed to introduce an element of fairness into an otherwise draconian and unjust Bill.

As my right hon. and learned Friend said, a total ban will kill off .22 target pistol shooting as a sport. The Government should not say that it is all right for the disabled—they can move on to other forms of shooting instead. Most of them will not be able to do so. They are able to use pistols; in many cases, they would not be able to use rifles.

We believe that it is still possible to allow our national competitors to continue to train and compete, and to ensure the highest standards of public safety. Indeed, the Home Secretary believes that it is possible to allow people to shoot pistols in this country and he believes that in future they will be able to do so safely and securely. He told the House that he will use his powers under section 5 to allow pistol shooting in this country. The only trouble is that British sportsmen will not be doing it, unless they go abroad for a few years to keep up the practice. Then they can come back and benefit from the powers that the Secretary of State will use to allow such competitions in the Commonwealth games.

All that we have suggested in the new clauses is allowing the Home Secretary to use the same powers to permit British sportsmen, in the same tightly controlled conditions, to have the same rights to shoot pistols as he will allow those foreign competitors, but the Government rule that out. There was no logic behind their argument.

The Government have refused to contemplate the reasonable new clauses that we tabled. That is another reason why we will vote against the Third Reading of the Bill tonight.

The Government have been hazy about compensation. Where will they find the £30 million-plus? My right hon. and learned Friend asked whether it would come out of the CCTV camera scheme. I have a deep suspicion that it will. Will the Government find that sum in the police budget or will it come from some other source? If the Home Secretary is not prepared to cut any other Home Office budget, he will have to go cap in hand to his right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, which will add another £30 million to the Government's £12 billion expenditure black hole.

The Government have also dodged the question of compensating gun clubs as a result of the total ban on handguns. The total ban will force some clubs to close. The vast majority of gun clubs are non-profit making and pay for facilities with members' subscriptions. Club trustees will face enormous liabilities when those clubs are forced to close. As my right hon. and learned Friend pointed out, we opted against compensating gun clubs during the passage of the 1997 legislation because clubs could remain open for shooters with lower-calibre pistols. Although it would be harder for them, the clubs could still survive.

The blanket ban imposed by the Bill will force gun clubs to close immediately—they cannot do anything else. Many clubs that cater to rifle and pistol shooting could follow suit. The Government's refusal to revisit the compensation issue is a further sign that they are hell bent on pushing ahead with a fundamentally unfair and harsh measure. That is why we oppose it. If this is the way in which Labour intends to govern, countless lawful groups and legitimate minorities will be the new victims of new Labour.

People's rights will be protected if they are flavour of the month in the opinion polls or the focus groups, but I send a warning to the country tonight: unless people fit the image created by our politically correct masters of new Labour, they will not have rights in future. It will not matter if their cause is just, because new Labour is not interested in that. Government policy is now driven by appealing to the gallery. We will oppose the Bill not just because it is unnecessary and unjust, but because it is the first in a potentially long list of measures on which the Government will not listen to reasonable arguments and will be determined to get their way, even when there is not the slightest justification for them.

10.21 pm

Mr. Straw: As we have just heard, the debate has produced some sharp exchanges. However, the whole House is united on one issue this evening: we join in praising my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) for one of the finest maiden speeches that I have heard in 18 years in this place. I commend her speech to the House—particularly in view of the fact that she delivered it without the assistance of notes and with great poise and fluency.

Doug Hoyle was well known to many hon. Members. I had the privilege of serving with Doug in the shadow Cabinet for many years and of canvassing for him in the dreary 1982 by-election. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) mentioned Lord Jenkins. It always rains in Warrington whenever I am there—and I travel through the town at least once a week while on my way to Blackburn, where it also rains a lot. That dismal experience of canvassing in Warrington, North in 1982 is fixed in my brain because Mr. Jenkins—as he then was—was the Social Democratic party candidate and I was canvassing in Jenkins road. It was a long time before I found a voter who was willing to support the Labour candidate. Despite my lack of persuasive powers on that occasion, Doug won the seat and he served the House and the Labour party very well. I am sure that my hon. Friend will prove a fine replacement.

We have been treated to a string of hyperbolic adjectives in support of the Opposition's position, which is that there is a huge gulf between the stance that they adopted in government in respect of the case for banning handguns above .22 calibre and the case that we are making for banning handguns of .22 calibre and below. The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) went right over the top as he wound up his speech by suggesting that if we were to pass the Bill, it would somehow mean the end of civilisation as we know it.

[Mr. Straw]

I should just like to remind the right hon. Gentleman of two things. First, as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan pointed out, had there been a free vote on the Conservative Benches before the general election, this Bill would not have been necessary. The simple truth was, and remains, that there was an unwhipped majority in the House in favour of a total ban on handguns in general civilian use. Secondly, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border both asked me what is the case for the Bill. Let me remind them that it is one of public safety.

Under the right hon. and learned Gentleman's measure, 160,000 handguns were taken out of circulation right away; the remaining 40,000—the .22s—could be stored and used in what were described as secure gun clubs.

Before the general election, the House had to decide on the logical argument that if there were to be secure gun clubs safe enough for guns of .22 calibre and below, why would those gun clubs not also be safe enough for the storage and use of guns above .22 calibre? After all, guns below or above .22 calibre have the common characteristic that each can quickly kill a large number of people. In answer, the right hon. and learned Gentleman argued that those gun clubs could not be secure enough for the storage and use of guns above .22 calibre. He said:

"higher calibre guns are particularly attractive to criminals and their storage in gun clubs in large numbers, whether dismantled or in one piece, would make gun clubs more attractive targets for theft."—[*Official Report*, 18 November 1996; Vol. 285, c. 787.]

One of the reasons why the right hon. and learned Gentleman lost that argument before the general election, if he did not quite lose the vote, was that he asked the House to accept that there was something intrinsically less safe in a .32 multi-shot handgun than in a .22 multi-shot handgun, but that is palpably not the case. As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North said, .22 handguns have been the weapon of choice of assassins and criminals across the world. Robert Kennedy and Yitzhak Rabin were killed with .22 handguns. Had Thomas Hamilton been in possession of .22 handguns rather than .357 magnums he could have achieved exactly the same carnage as he tragically and sadly did on 13 March last year.

The debate has understandably concentrated on where we draw the line and on the people who will be adversely affected by the Bill if, as I hope, it is passed. We are talking about up to 40,000 people who currently hold handgun certificates for .22 weapons and below. Although their interests are important, we should remember that the Bill was introduced out of the deepest shock and revulsion that was experienced across the country when, on 13 March 1996, Thomas Hamilton ran amok in Dunblane primary and in the space of three minutes killed 16 children and one adult and injured many more children. In the course of that, he traumatised the families and friends of those children and the town of Dunblane.

Thomas Hamilton shocked the nation. Questions were asked about how we had allowed the situation to develop where there were 200,000 handguns in general circulation, not for occupational use, but for the pursuit of a sport. That terrible tragedy brought us up sharp and brought home to us the question whether this country should ever again allow such a large number of handguns to be in general civilian use and pose such a potential danger as that which tragically occurred at Dunblane on 13 March.

Mr. Colvin *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I am sorry, but I am about to conclude.

The House was almost united in supporting the passage of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 to take out of circulation 160,000 of those 200,000 weapons. But it allowed 40,000 lethal handguns to remain available for use.

I regret that there are perfectly law-abiding shooters who will be disadvantaged both by the 1997 Act and by the Bill when it is enacted. As the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) said, we and he have approached this matter much more in sorrow than in anger. It is the Government's view, however, endorsed by the House, that the right to life must come before the right to practise a sport.

I believe that we owe the Bill to the parents and the children of Dunblane. It will bring into place tighter controls than those introduced by the 1997 Act. It is the responsibility of government to ensure that the levels of control of handguns are commensurate with public safety. The Bill fulfils that responsibility and I commend it to the House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third time:—

The House divided: Ayes 350, Noes 164.

Division No. 36] **[10.30 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard *(Sheffd Hallam)*
Allen, Graham *(Nottingham N)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Robert
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain *(Hammersmith & Fulham)*
Colman, Anthony *(Putney)*
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*

Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Curtis-Thomas, Ms Clare
Dafis, Cynog
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham, H'odge H'l)*
Dean, Ms Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael John *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr. Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Ms Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Ms Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Tessa
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Alice
Mallaber, Ms Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Ms Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Ms Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Bridget *(Lewisham)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rogers, Allan
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Ms Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Ms Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs. Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R. *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverhampton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steven
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Dr Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wright, Tony *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
David Clelland and Kevin Hughes

NOES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mouth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beith, Rt Hon A J

Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Eric
Foster, Don
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green , Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(N Essex)*
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merchant, Piers
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Opik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd 'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thompson, William
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Bowen Wells and
Peter Ainsworth

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time, and passed.

Breast Cancer (Devon)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Jane Kennedy.*]

10.45 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): An independent review commissioned by the Royal Devon and Exeter healthcare NHS trust identified micro-calcification in nine mammograms that needed further assessment rather than the advice that the patients had been given—that they should return home and wait for the normal recall period of three years for another mammogram. The issue has been raised on the Floor of the House before, but I welcome the opportunity to engage in a fuller discussion tonight, because the matter is of great concern to women and their families living in the Exeter area, including those in my constituency.

I am aware of the sensitivity of the subject. Cancer in any form can cause fear, and breast cancer causes fear to many women, especially those currently undergoing treatment. I do not intend to spread alarm by raising the matter tonight, but, in view of its seriousness, I would welcome the Minister's recognition of the fact that much wider implications in matters of policy and procedure will emerge from the very necessary investigation that is now to be held at Wonford House hospital in Exeter.

Now that the Chamber has cleared somewhat, let me express my gratitude for the presence of members of all parties. I note that the hon. Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) is here, as are Cornwall Members. They are here because they are aware of the wide-reaching implications of what has been revealed following the Exeter hospital announcement.

Let me put on record that it was the trust's own quality control that identified the problem. I pay tribute to it for having such measures in place and for being extremely frank and open in wanting the matter to be fully investigated and to be brought into the pubic domain. I also fully endorse the recommendation of the hospital's management that women should continue to keep their appointments at the hospital while the matter is being investigated.

The number of undetected breast cancers among women screened by the east Devon service is within the national average range—30 cancers for every 10,000 in the population. I shall refer later to the implications, the figures and the position as it compares with that in the rest of the country.

On 9 June in answer to a private notice question tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), it was stated that two consultants who were advising those patients were to be retrained. However, it was with concern that I read an article in *The Independent* on Saturday 7 June this year which identified the case of Miss Simone Renvoize who was treated by one of those consultants in his former hospital, the Treliske, in Cornwall.

I have received a copy of a letter, which I understand has been sent to the Secretary of State for Health by the cousin of Miss Renvoize, who has now died. I should like to read from a small portion of that letter. Miss Renvoize's cousin, Mrs. Barnes, states that in 1990 her cousin, Simone Renvoize, was sent to one of the consultant radiologists currently suspended for a mammogram at Treliske hospital in Truro. It revealed tumours in both breasts. However, she was told that her lumps were purely hormonal, leading to a delay of six and eleven and a half months respectively for mastectomies which she later had. Fellow radiologists who subsequently reviewed those X-rays could see clearly both the tumours. Mrs. Barnes's concern was that the error was known about while this doctor was employed at the Treliske hospital and he was even to move to the Exeter hospital with no suggestion of retraining at that time. She states that her cousin also began a legal case seeking redress for the inadequacies of her diagnosis and that treatment and medico-legal reports were prepared but still no one alerted the Exeter hospital.

We all recognise and, having worked for a short time in the Wonford House hospital, I certainly recognise, that doctors are not infallible and make mistakes. In cancer diagnosis especially, a doctor may often see grey areas on a mammogram that are not easy immediately to recognise. However, it seems that here the people concerned did not err on the side of caution, which is a reasonable expectation by patients. It is clear that the same procedures were carried out by the same person over a long period.

I have asked the management of Wonford House hospital what references were taken up and whether anything was drawn to their attention that made it clear that retraining was needed much earlier. I understand that inquiries have been made and that nothing in the references of this person gave any reason for further investigation.

I have also received a letter from a constituent who is a state registered nurse and who worked at the Wonford House hospital. She expressed concerns about staff in the unit who have been aware of the diagnosis controversy but who, in many cases, felt it difficult to share their concerns with senior management at the hospital. I should like to ask the Minister to consider two matters in relation to the wider implications of this issue.

First, will the hon. Lady look at the way in which medical references are taken up? That matter bears further investigation, not just in this case but in the case of boards which interview clinicians. Does the way that those interviews are carried out mean that boards can be absolutely sure that they are receiving an accurate account of a person's aptitude and ability to carry out specific tasks? Secondly, as a result of what has been said and written to me by hospital staff, I am aware that the issue of whistleblowers can be controversial and can have adverse effects both ways.

There must be a structure in hospitals to allow staff to make concerns known to senior management without feeling in any way intimidated or that their positions are put at risk. Obviously, here we have a situation where I am being told by a nurse in that hospital that it was common knowledge that there was concern among other staff that there were problems in this area.

There is always the question of the clinician, the surgeon, having the final say and using his or her medical judgment about an individual case, and we all recognise their need to be able to do that. If Wonford House hospital in Exeter is, like other hospitals throughout the country, to be designated a specialist centre for cancer treatment, those of us who live in the region and who use the hospital

[Mrs. Angela Browning]

must have confidence that we are receiving in that hospital the best possible practice that has been garnered from the best hospitals throughout the country.

My understanding was that the chief medical officer's recommendations—the Calman response to considering the way in which we take forward specialist cancer centres in the region—envisaged that, instead of those of us who live out in the sticks having to go to the big cities or even to London for specialist treatment for serious diseases, the best that was available would come to us, and that, if it came to us, the hospitals that offered that level of treatment would be able to say that they were specialist cancer treatment centres. I am sure that I speak for many of my constituents—I am certainly speaking personally now—when I say that, if I needed specialist treatment, particularly cancer treatment, I would rather have it at the Royal Marsden hospital and know that I was going to get the best treatment than have someone stick a label on my local hospital, which did not live up to its name.

In fairness to the people who work in Wonford House hospital, particularly those working in other disciplines and specialising in other areas of cancer treatment, it is vital that an analysis is made not just of the procedures that are carried out there, but of what it is able to offer us in terms of outcomes, if it is to become a specialist centre.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): In pressing what my hon. Friend is saying, and I have followed it clearly, will she urge the Minister to examine the facts so that the hospital can reassure what must be about 5,000 to 6,000 women who have been tested that they are no longer at risk or, if there is any risk, that they are going to be called back in at the earliest possible and proper time to be re-examined? It is essential that those people should not be left still wondering what is going to happen to them.

Mrs. Browning: I concur with my right hon. Friend's concern on behalf of his constituents. We want not only quick action and a full investigation of what has gone on, but lessons to be learnt from this. Clearly, there are lessons to be learnt that may have even national implications over a wide area. I hope that this debate will trigger that. It is my intention that we learn from what has been an unhappy experience.

Women need reassurance that the way in which they are screened, diagnosed and treated for breast cancer should not be a geographical lottery. Where people live should not matter in terms of the sort of service that they receive. We should be considering why different parts of the country produce different outcomes. The Cancer Relief Macmillan Fund charity endorses my view that this country's mortality rate does not compare well with that of other countries.

We have one of the worst records in the world for breast cancer. It is difficult to identify why that is so. There is research into the matter and various theories are suggested, but the fact is that our rate is 29.3 per 100,000 of population, whereas it is 19.4 in France and 17.3 in Germany. When our rate compares so badly with those of other countries, surely within the whole spectrum of the medical profession dealing with the disease there must be a concentrated interest in the reason for the figures and what can be done to reduce them through screening, diagnosis and treatment.

Anyone working in the medical profession, whether at consultant or any other level, should be hungry to identify what is happening elsewhere in the country and what new procedures are being adopted. We must garner the best practice that is available and take that out into the regions.

When I looked in the Library, I found figures produced by Macmillan showing that mortality rates from breast cancer in the south-west between 1993 and 1995—the latest figures available—were higher per 100,000 of population than was the case in any other part of the country. That, too, is a cause of concern. If the disease is being treated better in other parts of the country, please can we find out what it is that they do better and please can the people who practise is this area of medicine and surgery in my part of the country not be too proud to find out why the rates are better elsewhere? We want the matter to be taken seriously. I know that the Department's guidelines to purchasing authorities say that they should look at outcomes. Right across the spectrum, outcomes involve what happens in screening, what happens when cancer is detected and what happens thereafter.

I hope that tonight the Minister will reassure us that what has happened in Exeter will be fully investigated and that any lessons to be learned, which may have national implications, will be speedily adopted by the Department. We look to the Minister and the Secretary of State to ensure that no stone is left unturned. Until the matter is investigated and the lessons learned, and until there are changes to put things right, I and other women will not be fully confident about what is being offered to us locally.

It is devastating for women who have or think they may have breast cancer. We know that doctors cannot always perform miracles, but let us get as near to a miracle as we can.

11.3 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Ms Tessa Jowell): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) for raising this subject this evening. I am glad to echo both her feelings of outrage and the regret expressed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State last week about what happened in Devon. This debate gives us the opportunity to say once again how sorry we are for the women and their families and friends who have been affected in a variety of ways—and in particular, those close to the two women who died because of the events that gave rise to the inquiry.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): As the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) said, one of those concerned was a constituent of mine. It was a tragic case of misdiagnosis at the Treliske hospital in Cornwall. As the hon. Lady said, it is not just people in Devon who are affected by what happened at the Wonford House hospital—there is anxiety throughout the west country.

The failure of information between one hospital trust and another raises important questions about the relationship between trusts in different parts of the country. I hope that the Minister will deal with that point.

Ms Jowell: I entirely accept the hon. Gentleman's point and, of course, we regret the distress, further illness, and in two cases the deaths, of patients who had the right to expect better. That is why we have taken rapid action to

establish precisely what happened in that dreadful business and to learn, as quickly as we can, any lessons that that horrifying story has to teach us.

I wish briefly to set out the facts as we currently understand them. In February this year, concern was expressed by medical staff about the work of two consultant radiologists, one employed by the Royal Devon and Exeter Healthcare NHS trust and the other by the South Devon Healthcare NHS trust at Torbay.

Contrary to the impression given by some reports in the media, the consultants undertook diagnostic mammography for women with symptoms of cancer, as well as more routine breast cancer screening. Twelve sets of mammograms, including both symptomatic and screening cases, were sent for an external review to an independent consultant who worked in Nottingham. Nine of those mammograms were found to be faulty.

The review concluded that further assessment should have been undertaken in nine of the cases. It recommended that the doctors concerned should undergo formal retraining and that further audits should be undertaken of the mammograms of all women identified as requiring early recall for screening, and of all cancers that have occurred between screenings in the past five years.

The doctors concerned are not currently working in the NHS and management action is under way locally to review the management of the breast screening service and the provision of symptomatic services. An audit will be undertaken of the films of women who have been scheduled for recall earlier than the normal three-year screening interval, the films of women recalled for assessment after screening during the previous two years and the films of women with cancer that has occurred between screening invitations.

There will be a meeting shortly between the trust and representatives from other screening centres to make the necessary arrangements for the audit. I should add that both screening and services for breast cancer are continuing to be provided in Exeter, as locum arrangements have been made.

I assure the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton that the Government are determined to get to the bottom of what happened at the Royal Devon and Exeter trust. We would welcome any information to help the inquiry from hon. Members who may be able, through constituency cases or other representations, to shed further light on the events that led to the tragedies.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced yesterday, the Government's chief medical officer is undertaking an urgent review of breast services in Exeter, to establish the facts and to report his findings to the Secretary of State, and, in the light of those findings, to consider the implications for breast cancer services as a whole, again reporting his conclusions to the Secretary of State. We hope that his report will be available by mid-July. An interim and immediate report on the inquiry so far will be available by the end of this week and my right hon. Friend will happy to brief the hon. Lady about the interim findings.

The chief medical officer has assembled a distinguished independent team to assist him, including the president of the Royal College of Radiologists, a consultant surgeon from Huddersfield, a cancer nursing specialist, who is also a member of the expert advisory group on cancer, the chief executive of the Royal Marsden hospital, and Miss Polly Toynbee, who will represent lay interests. The team has already started work—it visited Exeter yesterday and began by interviewing a wide range of staff to collect detailed information.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton mentioned the need to take representations from staff who may be reluctant to come forward. It is important that the views and information that staff gain in clinical practice are made available. We realise that some trusts make that task more difficult for staff than others, but we will provide every assistance to staff members, so that their representations aid the inquiry.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): I should like to express my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Minister and to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton for the constructive and tripartisan approach that hon. Members have adopted in dealing with the crisis. I am grateful also for the swift and open way in which the Government and the Royal Devon and Exeter hospital have responded.

Will my hon. Friend the Minister please continue to encourage women in my constituency to come forward for testing, which is incredibly important? Today, can she tell those women that they can have full faith in the results of current hospital tests? Will she also confirm that the Government's commitment to women's health and the £10 million that Ministers have earmarked to speed up the breast screening process will help to resolve some of the problems that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton mentioned and our poor record nationally in dealing with breast cancer?

Ms Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend and I entirely endorse his call to women, not only in his constituency but in all constituencies, to continue to attend for breast cancer screening, because screening remains the single most effective way in which to identify breast cancer at a very early stage.

The Government will not rest until we have applied in practice every lesson that the inquiry shows must be learned and applied. Women should realise not only the importance of regular screening but the fact that screening services will be subject to regular review and quality checks. Those services will be supported and developed further in the light of the best possible information on developments in treatment and screening technology.

It is therefore important that we identify specifically what happened in a dreadful set of circumstances and ensure that those lessons are applied locally, to restore and rebuild women's confidence. We must also ensure that the lessons learned are applied across the screening service and on a national basis.

Sir Peter Emery: I cannot do other than praise the Minister for the action that the Government are taking for the future; but how shall I respond to women who write to me saying, "Sir Peter, I have been there; what do I do? I had a test two years ago or 18 months ago—am I at risk? What action should I take? How should I react to this great problem?" Reassurance of those people is of very considerable importance to all constituents, whether they are in Exeter, Totnes or any other local constituency.

[Sir Peter Emery]

I had hoped that we would find a way in which to give such reassurance to those women as soon as humanly possible.

Ms Jowell: It is obviously a matter of concern. I advise the right hon. Gentleman to refer his constituents who may have those concerns to the helpline that was established immediately after the events were disclosed. I also assure him that a further audit of mammograms and diagnostic investigation is being conducted to establish that no further mistakes were made. I would in the first instance suggest that the right hon. Gentleman refers his constituents to the helpline, so that they get the reassurance and information that they might want.

We shall certainly continue supporting the implementation of the Calman/Hine model of cancer service, which we believe provides the best and safest basis for the delivery of cancer services in Devon and Exeter, as well as across the country. We also intend to produce a series of evidence-based guideline documents responding to some of the points raised by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton in relation to the importance of lessons learned in practice being applied to future clinical development. We are determined to ensure that those lessons are applied for the benefit not only of her constituents but of people across the country.

The hon. Lady asked about local cancer centres. The Plymouth Hospitals NHS trust and the Royal Devon and Exeter Healthcare NHS trust have both been designated as cancer centres, but it was agreed that the Plymouth Hospitals trust would take responsibility for clinical leadership.

The hon. Lady will also be aware that we are moving to the implementation of clear treatment protocols, which will be a very important step in ending the geographical lottery and ensuring that there is a national breast cancer service for all women—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned accordingly at fifteen minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 19 June 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Animal Welfare

1. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the Government's priorities are with regard to animal welfare. [2890]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Dr. John Cunningham): We have already acted to update the rules on welfare in transit in line with European Union requirements. We have also commissioned an urgent review of the procedures for checking animals and clearing them as fit before export. We are planning action on a further range of animal welfare issues which we shall announce in due course, including the conclusions of the report of Professor Krebs on badgers and bovine tuberculosis.

Mr. Loughton: I am grateful to the Minister for the generality of his response. He will be aware that my constituency contains the important port of Shoreham, which made the headlines for all the wrong reasons during the veal calf export saga. What assurances can he give my many constituents who were involved in the demonstrations that this Government will continue the good work of the last Government, who banned veal crates in this country and secured European agreement on transport times; that he will try to shorten transport times even further; and that the restrictions imposed on the continent will be enforced?

Dr. Cunningham: We are putting increasing emphasis on the need to export meat rather than live animals. There is no question of veal crates returning to use in this country. As for the hon. Gentleman's point about the European Union, the order that I announced about two weeks ago had been lying on the table in the Ministry for several months, presumably because the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) and his colleagues, when they were in government, did not have the nerve to bring it to the House in case it caused a row among their Euro-sceptics. We have implemented that order very quickly.

Mr. Hogg: I welcome the Minister and his team to the Front Bench.

On matters of animal welfare, I have observed that the Minister has asked the Forestry Commission for advice about fox hunting. May I ask his reasons? Do I detect a willingness on his part to use ministerial power to prohibit fox hunting? Surely, if that is to be done at all, it should be done only through a statute passed by the House. What we are seeing is an unscrupulous use of ministerial power that is an abuse of the Executive.

Dr. Cunningham: Permit me a wry smile, Madam Speaker, at that preposterous nonsense. If I had not made inquiries about what was happening on Forestry Commission land in respect of all hunting—not just fox hunting—I would presumably have been criticised. Whether the Forestry Commission licenses or does not license hunting on its land is a matter for it, and for it alone.

Set-aside Land

2. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the largest payment made to a single landowner under the set-aside regime for the latest year for which figures are available. [2891]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The precise answer to my hon. Friend's question about the set-aside land is £230,082, which formed part of a larger payment—in 1996, under the arable area payments scheme—of £2,007,993.

Mr. Prentice: Does not that answer simply illustrate how grotesque and indefensible the set-aside scheme is? Farmers—grain barons—can receive thousands of pounds for not growing crops, while hill farmers, for example, struggle to eke out a living. Is there not a compelling case for getting rid of set-aside and production subsidies, and putting the money where it is needed—into environmental schemes and rural communities, and rebuilding our countryside?

Mr. Rooker: My right hon. Friend the Minister will be pressing next week for precisely that. I repeat that the amount paid for set-aside, for not using land, was some 10 per cent. of the total payment to the landowners concerned.

Mr. Greenway: Does the Minister agree that there are many large estates and that much of this money supports employment which might not otherwise be retained? May we have an assurance right at the beginning of the Government's term of office that in the common agricultural policy reform negotiations the Government will have nothing whatever to do with arguments about modulation and that there will be no discrimination against British farmers because of the size of those farms?

Mr. Rooker: We are not in favour of modulation, but no one can convince me that spending more than £1.1 billion on the arable area system is a job creation scheme. I reject that. Only £138 million of that amount is in respect of land that is set aside and not used.

Common Agricultural Policy

3. **Mr. Todd:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what goals he has for the reform of the common agricultural policy; what strategy he will follow to achieve those goals; and if he will make a statement. [2892]

Dr. John Cunningham: I will take every opportunity with my European colleagues to press for the redirection of the CAP away from high prices and production controls towards a market-oriented policy which will benefit consumers and the environment and enable our farmers to compete effectively in world markets.

Mr. Todd: First, I welcome the members of the Front-Bench team to their places. I suspect that that welcome is shared by many Opposition Members. Do my right hon. Friend's objectives for reform encompass the goal of achieving a free market in agricultural products throughout the world? That goal would be greatly favoured by many south Derbyshire farmers and other progressive farmers in this country.

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, we want the realities of the global market to bear down on the common agricultural policy, and we want British farmers to take advantage of expanding world markets. Many aspects of the current common agricultural policy prevent them from doing that.

Mr. Wigley: I also welcome the Minister to his job. Does he agree that many farmers, not only in the beef sector but in the sheep sector are considerably worried about their prospects over the next couple of years? The CAP reforms could have a direct material effect on their well-being. Does he further agree that it is important to ensure that farmers are able to continue to be custodians of the countryside and that any settlement must ensure the maintenance of the ability of small and medium-sized farms to remain in business and not lead to amalgamation, which would drive them out of business?

Dr. Cunningham: Last year, farmers producing lambs did very well. It is too early to say what the circumstances will be this year, but we have taken action to maintain confidence in United Kingdom lamb and we shall continue to do that. It is a premium product and we want farmers to be well rewarded for producing it. The hon. Gentleman knows that, as a consequence of mismanagement by the previous Administration in respect of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, the beef sector is in serious circumstances. As I have said before, we have inherited grave difficulties, and I am almost daily in contact or in discussion with people in Europe and with my officials to see what we can do to try to get the ban lifted.

Mr. Stevenson: I also welcome my right hon. and hon. Friends to the Government Front Bench. Does my right hon. Friend accept that farming is an important element of prosperity in rural communities? Does he also accept that, despite the enormous sums that have been devoted to the common agricultural policy, particularly over the past 25 years, rural communities have had real problems and job losses as a result? Is not the time long overdue for a study into how we can integrate support for agriculture to provide for the well-being and benefit of rural communities?

Dr. Cunningham: I have represented a large rural constituency for 27 years, so I am happy to agree with my hon. Friend that it is important to have effective policies for rural communities and economies as well as for farmers. Of course, agriculture is the backbone of many rural economies and we must ensure that it remains a vibrant and efficient sector of industry. I would like the CAP to be transformed from a policy of simply supporting and controlling production to one that is more market oriented, and I would like us to use some of the resources from the CAP to invest in rural economies for the long term.

Mr. Baldry: The right hon. Gentleman appreciates that the immediate concern of many farmers is not CAP reform, but the lifting of the export ban on beef and beef products. Before the general election, he fairly said that that matter was an urgent priority. Today, he talks about daily discussions. I think that everyone would be interested to know what his realistic assessment is of the time scale that will be necessary for him to make progress on the lifting of the beef ban and what the conditions are for the beef ban being lifted.

Dr. Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman is right. This is an urgent matter, but I am not going to get into the boastful claims of the hon. Gentleman and his right hon. Friends, who, as everyone recalls, came here and told us that the beef ban would be lifted by last November. That was an absolutely bogus claim. What is more, as they had not even begun to activate the selective cull until February and March this year—that is on the record—it is clear that there was no hope of the beef ban ever being lifted. I am not going to make predictions about dates for the lifting of the ban. It would be foolish to do so. The previous Administration made an idle boast and I am not going to make the same mistake.

Meat Products (Labelling)

4. **Mr. Cousins:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to require mechanically recovered meat material to be separately and specifically labelled in food products. [2894]

Mr. Rooker: United Kingdom regulators already believe that existing food labelling rules require that mechanically recovered meat products should be labelled separately. If there is any doubt about that, there has already been one successful prosecution, so the matter has been upheld by the British courts. Recently, we have succeeded in getting the rest of Europe to go along with us, so we are in the lead on this.

Mr. Cousins: I cheerfully welcome my hon. Friend to his new position.

Does my hon. Friend agree that consumers wish to know what they eat, and that they do not know in every case that the meat that they eat has been produced by firing high-pressure water jets at animal carcases, to produce what the Government Food Standards Committee once described as

"a highly coloured slurry or emulsion"?

This must be made absolutely clear and it must not be left entirely to local authorities such as Shropshire and Somerset to carry out the necessary enforcement action.

Mr. Rooker: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. That is why the regulations and the guidance to them are not only being reviewed, but will be reinforced, certainly by the end of this year.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Can the Minister tell us how a consumer knows that a product does not come from meat, particularly beef, being produced in other countries, which import into this country material that could contain traces of BSE, defeating the things that we are already doing to ensure that BSE is kept out of the food chain?

Mr. Rooker: We cannot do that at the moment because the previous Government did not take any action to end the problem. This Government are taking action. As the hon. Gentleman knows, if action is not agreed by the European Union by 22 July, the regulations and orders will be brought to the House forthwith.

Mr. Pickthall: While my hon. Friend is considering the labelling of food products, will he consider the labelling of products that contain genetically modified ingredients and ensure that the consumer is given the choice as to whether to consume such ingredients?

Mr. Rooker: It has already been done and negotiators in Brussels have received new instructions from the Government and this Department. If a food product may contain genetically modified material, the label will have to say so because producers refuse to separate the crop ingredients.

Organic Farming

5. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to encourage the organic farming sector. [2895]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): We want to encourage an expansion of organic production and are considering the best ways of achieving that.

Mr. Baker: I am grateful to the Minister for his encouragement. Is he aware that, according to the House of Commons Library, only 0.1 per cent. of land in England is farmed organically, which compares unfavourably with other European countries—for example, in Austria, the figure is 8 per cent.—and that the previous Government's investment to promote organic farming was lamentable in the extreme?

Will the Minister increase the amount of money allocated by the Government to improve and encourage organic farming? Will he ensure that home demand is met by this country, because currently it is being met by imports, which is disadvantageous for consumers and farmers?

Mr. Morley: The actual figure for production is 0.3 per cent. Nevertheless, it is very low compared with the European average. The Government want to encourage organic production and we recognise that there is a market for organic products. However, the market in, for example, milk is currently being filled by imports because this country cannot meet the necessary production level. The Agriculture Select Committee has produced an excellent report and made a number of recommendations relating to the organic sector, to which this Government will be responding shortly.

Mr. Flynn: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new post. Although the increase in organic farming is welcome, does it not still mean that the other type of farming—which could be correctly labelled chemical farming—is responsible for the majority of our farm products? When looking at the cost of products from organic farms, why do we not take into account the cost of products from chemical farms—which should be measured not just immediately in the marketplace, but over hundreds, if not thousands of years in the enormous damage that pesticides and other chemicals do to our environment?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend makes a good point. With intensive agriculture, the cost of inputs is important for both the long-term environmental consequences and the cost of production that farmers have to bear. The organic sector has an important role and we are encouraging a reduced use of inputs such as integrated crop management.

Mr. Boswell: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new responsibilities. Given the efforts of his hon. Friends, over a long time and through a characteristic drip feed, to belittle the real efforts made by Conservative Ministers to support organic farming, including expenditure of more than £1 million a year and the launch last year of the organic conversion information service, will the Minister tell the House how much extra funding his Department will make available for organic farming, where the money will be found and when?

Mr. Morley: The current year's budget for organic conversion is more than £800,000. There is also £1 million available for research and development in the organic sector. The amount available for conversion will increase in the next financial year—that is already in the Department's budget. It is an important matter.

It is fair to point out that the take-up of funds under the Conservative Government was lower than the amount available because of the level of conversion grants. It is an issue that we are considering in our response to the Select Committee report.

Poultry

6. **Mr. Whittingdale:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received about the regulations governing the production of New York dressed poultry. [2896]

Mr. Rooker: We have received a number of representations about the end of the three-year phase-out of the derogation from the regulations. The prohibition on the sale of uneviscerated poultry from licensed premises will stand. I have checked on the name—in Birmingham we call it, "Not yet dressed poultry."

Mr. Whittingdale: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the ban on the sale of New York dressed poultry from

licensed plants is anomalous, will diminish consumer choice and represents another blow to independent butchers struggling to compete with superstores? Will he reconsider his response and allow an extension of the previous derogation for a further three years?

Mr. Rooker: There is absolutely no chance of a further derogation. If the hon. Gentleman reads column *219* of yesterday's *Hansard*, he will see that I am looking at the regulations on unlicensed premises. It is a health hazard and we need to check it out.

Beef Ban

7. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps are being taken by the Government to have the beef ban lifted as quickly as possible. [2897]

Dr. John Cunningham: The Prime Minister and I have held discussions with the President of the European Commission and Commissioners Fischler and Bonino on how to have the export ban lifted as quickly as possible. They have been constructive and helpful. We are also considering, in consultation with the Commission, what other options the Florence agreement has to offer for resuming exports.

Mr. Paterson: Does the Minister understand that the position is now desperate? Yesterday, prices in Oswestry and Market Drayton hit a 16-year low, bumping around the 90p mark. He cannot keep hiding behind the actions of the previous Government—*[Interruption.]* Can I ask on behalf of my constituents that the Minister takes responsibility and gives us a clear date by which that iniquitous ban will be lifted?

Dr. Cunningham: If the hon. Gentleman does not learn quickly that that type of nonsense is of no help to his constituents, he probably will not be an hon. Member after the next general election. Does he really expect that, in seven weeks, the Government could have undone the untold damage inflicted by previous Conservative Ministers on the British beef industry? If he believes that, he is living in cloud cuckoo land. We have attempted quickly to re-establish sensible working relationships with the Commission and the European Parliament, and we are pressing ahead as quickly as possible on the issue. Like the hon. Gentleman, I represent beef farmers, and I do not need any lessons from him about the damage that has been inflicted on them because of 18 years of Conservative government.

Mr. Charles Kennedy: The Minister could be forgiven—although this is only his second outing at the Dispatch Box; yesterday he dealt with the quota hopping issue, and today he dealt with the question from the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson)—for thinking that he has already heard it all about his departmental administration. Given the on-going and inherited crisis in the beef industry, however, may I press him on one constructive point, which has found favour within the National Farmers Union—the position of calves born after 1 August 1996 and that are a minimum of six months old? Is there some mechanism for proceeding in at least that sector, so that we can establish some practical and political momentum and find a way in which to achieve an eventual overall lifting of the ban?

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his much more rational contribution to a serious problem. He and the NFU are correct on that point, about which I have had discussions with Sir David Naish. I have had discussions on the same point with Commissioner Fischler—with whom, only today, I once again discussed the issues on the telephone. We are pressing ahead with talks about a born-after scheme, as we are pressing ahead with the selective cull—which the previous Administration neglected to do. Moreover, my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is expediting a cattle traceability scheme. All those actions must be taken to satisfy European Union legislation before there is any hope of having the ban lifted. I agree with the hon. Gentleman on his principal point, and we are working on it.

Mr. Hogg: The right hon. Gentleman will know that, during the past 18 months, I was much criticised for not securing a timetable. Will he confirm that he has had many discussions with the Commissioners and with his fellow Ministers in Europe? Will he also confirm that he himself has achieved no timetable, no bankable assurances and—if he is absolutely honest with the House—no progress of any kind?

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, I can confirm that—literally from the Government's first days—I have had a whole series of meetings. Moreover, I have not sought a timetable, because too many problems have been left outstanding by the right hon. and learned Gentleman—including his failure to fulfil effectively the terms and conditions of the Florence agreement, which the former Prime Minister and former Foreign Secretary signed up to; his failure properly to implement the selective cull; and his failure to develop an effective cattle traceability scheme. All those problems are a result of his stewardship. They were unresolved when we took office, and it is absurd to think that we could immediately go to Brussels and demand a date for lifting the ban.

Beef Sector

8. **Mr. Beith:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to deal with the current problems in the beef sector. [2898]

Dr. John Cunningham: I am continuing in my efforts to remove the ban on UK beef exports. I will also be seeking fundamental reform of the beef regime in forthcoming negotiations in Brussels.

Mr. Beith: While I welcome all the work that the Minister is doing to deal with the serious situation in the beef industry, can he tell us when we can be sure that no beef can be imported into this country which fails to meet the exacting standards expected of British farmers, when we can expect to have developed a tracing scheme that could benefit herds in grass-fed areas like Northumberland, and when we can hope for some

compensation for British farmers similar to that obtained by European farmers from European funds for fluctuations in the green pound?

Dr. Cunningham: I have announced action on beef imports. I very much hope that people who are importing beef into this country—it is projected to total 160,000 tonnes this year—are acting responsibly on their own account. I would much prefer a European Union-wide scheme for the removal of specified risk materials from all beef, but I have made it clear, and do so again today, that I am giving the European Union Agriculture Council until its July meeting to introduce that action on an EU-wide basis. If it does not do so, I shall act unilaterally—reluctantly, but unilaterally—by laying orders in the House to ensure that all beef and bovine products imported into Britain are subject to the same rigorous controls on health grounds that British beef is. I cannot be clearer than that. That action was open to the previous Administration but, for reasons that I do not understand, they declined to take it.

In addition, my hon. Friend the Minister of State is working to accelerate progress on the cattle traceability scheme which I hope we shall have in place early in 1998. It is essential that we have a recognised and accepted scheme if there is to be any hope of the ban being lifted. Great progress has been made in Northern Ireland, but much less progress has been made in the rest of the UK.

Finally, I am aware of and have had discussions with Sir David Naish about the claims for compensation, and I am considering the matter.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I, too, add my congratulations to the right hon. Gentleman and his team. I am sure that he is as concerned as I am about the plight of beef farmers, given that the market for over-30-months old beef is now half what it was at the time of the announcement on 20 March. It is a pity that no Labour Back Benchers are asking him questions about the matter on behalf of their constituents. Given that the beef market is so dire, will he deny the rumour circulating today that he is thinking about reducing the OTMS payments?

Dr. Cunningham: I am not confirming or denying any rumours in the press; what is more, I have not seen them myself.

Mr. Skinner: Does my right hon. Friend recall that when we were trying to wrestle with the problem created by the Tory Government and when about £3 billion was lost—money that could have been spent on hospitals, schools and so on—he heard some of us reminding the Government at that time that while there was compensation of a kind for farmers, some people were left out completely? Casualties included people in the meat production trade and lorry drivers who were sacked on the spot and did not get a penny-piece. When my right hon. Friend is devising schemes, not mentioning Florence or November in any judgment he makes, will he bear in mind the casualties who should be looked after?

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, but the reality is that the mishandling of the BSE crisis in this country has been a scandal that has cost the taxpayer approaching £2 billion—[HON. MEMBERS: "How much?"]—two billion pounds, and the costs continue to rise. The previous Administration made no proper public expenditure provision for those costs in the medium term and developed no policy for the disposal of the thousands of tonnes of dead animals around the country that may have had BSE. We have inherited a series of desperately difficult circumstances. My hon. Friend has mentioned two or three other problems that were also neglected by the previous Government.

Mr. Thompson: I am sure that many of us accept that the Minister is genuinely doing all that he can to get the ban lifted. Does he recognise that the only power that we have left is the power of persuasion? Many of us are not satisfied that our colleagues in Europe are as keen to get the ban lifted as we are. Is the Minister satisfied that they are as keen as he is?

Dr. Cunningham: We are bound by the European legislation that came about as a consequence of the BSE crisis. We cannot wish that legislation away. We have to meet its requirements, which were agreed by the previous Administration. We have to work within the terms of the legislation and the Florence agreement, negotiated by the previous Government. I am doing everything I can to meet those conditions as quickly as possible. In the meantime, we are thinking of ways to try to alleviate the problems that beef producers are facing, such as the action that I mentioned to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith).

CAP (Fruit and Vegetables)

9. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the expenditure on the destruction of fruit and vegetables through common agriculture policies in the most recent year for which figures are available; and what was the average amount in the previous five years. [2899]

Mr. Morley: In 1996, total expenditure on intervention across the European Union was £145 million. The average for the previous five years was £265 million. The cost of those fruits and vegetables subsequently destroyed, as opposed to those put to other end uses, cannot be separately identified.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Is it not sickening that hundreds of millions of pounds have been spent on destroying food to keep prices artificially high, thereby undermining the living standards of the poor? Will the new Labour Government commit themselves today to scrapping that sickening protection racket, which is a hundred thousand miles from what I had always understood socialism to stand for?

Mr. Morley: Such levels of destruction and the costs are clearly scandalous. There is no other word for it. Fruit and vegetable regime reforms have reduced the payments by 40 per cent. and the amounts of produce destroyed. Intervention is a part of the common agricultural policy. We shall be pressing for reforms of such elements of the CAP.

Live Animal Transport

10. **Mr. Hope:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to improve the conditions in which live animals are transported. [2900]

Mr. Morley: As my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has just explained to the

hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton), as a first step we have implemented the new EU rules which ought to have been implemented by 31 December 1996. We are actively considering other measures to ensure that the highest welfare standards are applied.

Mr. Hope: I thank the Minister for his reply. Will he ensure that the arrangements for the transport of animals in Europe are up to the high standards that apply in Britain? Will he also ensure that any operators that breach the laws on animal transportation are dealt with forcefully—by the withdrawal of their operator's licence if necessary?

Mr. Morley: One of the advantages of the implementation of the orders on the welfare of animals in transport is that they introduce, for the first time, compulsory licensing for hauliers moving animals. That will mean that animal exporters found to be in breach of regulations will face having their licences removed. The Government will not have the slightest hesitation in doing that.

Mr. Fabricant: With regard to the export of live animals, and indeed dead animals, have not the hon. Gentleman's officials been telling farmers in the west country since the Amsterdam summit that the beef ban is likely to last for at least two years—yes or no?

Mr. Morley: First, the Government draw a distinction in policy between the export of live animals and that of dead animals. We want to promote the export of meat and we want a strong meat trade. We believe that that should be given priority rather than the export of live animals that are slaughtered abroad and, on occasion, passed off as meat from the country in question. We of course want the restoration of beef exports as part of the strong meat trade. My right hon. Friend the Minister has explained the progress in, and the priority given to, that matter.

Agri-monetary Revaluation

11. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans the Government have to apply to the European Commission for a full implementation of the compensation package available in respect of agri-monetary revaluation. [2901]

Mr. Rooker: Paying the aid would have significant implications for United Kingdom public expenditure. We are considering carefully the case made by interested parties for payment, but we have until 31 January next year to decide on the matter.

Mr. Heath: Does the hon. Gentleman understand the extent of the difficulties that beef producers, and the dairy sector in the west country particularly, are facing as a result of the previous Government's actions over many years? Does he realise that those problems are being exacerbated by imports and that assistance is required, not some time next year, but now? If the Government do not take the opportunity of using the EU 50 per cent. resources that are available to them, producers will wonder why.

Mr. Rooker: I understand, and we share entirely, the concern of the hon. Gentleman's constituents. We cannot take an early decision on the matter; we have time. I remind the hon. Gentleman and the House that the value of CAP amounts is 9.4 per cent. higher than in January 1992, even taking into account the most recent revaluation of 5 June. The current protection, following the effects of the January and March revaluations of the freeze rates that were used to calculate sterling payments this year, will be worth £400 million over the next two years.

Common Agricultural Policy

12. **Mr. Lansley:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the renegotiation of the common agricultural policy. [2902]

Dr. John Cunningham: The need for CAP reform is widely recognised and is a major priority for the Government. A redirection of the CAP away from high prices and production controls is essential if EU agriculture is to remain competitive and dynamic in the face of the liberalisation of world trade and the effects of EU enlargement.

Mr. Lansley: In response to an earlier question, the Minister of State said that he was not in favour of modulation. Will the Minister go further and say that he will reject any proposal for CAP reform that incorporated modulation?

Dr. Cunningham: I can go further still and say that I will reject any proposals that come up under the CAP that would disadvantage British farmers.

On modulation, to which I am totally opposed, I would not want a scheme to be introduced that discriminated unfairly against the UK generally and our efficient large farmers in particular.

Mr. Pike: I recognise that my right hon. Friend has quite rightly identified the problems of enlargement in relation to the CAP, but what discussions are the Government having with those nations that might join the EU at some future date, such as Poland and Romania, whose agricultural economies would have a grave effect on the CAP's future?

Dr. Cunningham: That is principally a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. Those matters are being discussed not only by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary but by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in the context of the intergovernmental conference and the wider debate about EU enlargement, which we support.

Mrs. Ewing: Given that not much progress seems to have been made on the issue of EU enlargement at the Amsterdam summit, and that reform of the CAP has to a great extent hinged on that issue, will the right hon. Gentleman advise the House, especially those of us who represent agricultural communities, how negotiations and discussions will take place? Enlargement is linked with the development of structural and regional funds, particularly for less-favoured areas. The issue is important to all of us who represent rural constituencies. I would like to hear Government Front Benchers send the message today that negotiations and discussions will take place in a positive fashion.

Dr. Cunningham: If the hon. Lady is asking for an assurance that we will adopt a positive approach to discussions and negotiations on EU enlargement, I can give her that without hesitation. Not to be able at the same time to seek fundamental reforms of the CAP would be damaging for us and, in the long term, the EU's structure would become unstable because an enlarged union would not be able to finance the current CAP.

Farmers (Less-favoured Areas)

13. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to improve the long-term prospects of farmers in less-favoured areas; and if he will make a statement. [2903]

Mr. Morley: My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is well aware of the problems of farming in the less-favoured areas as his constituency includes less-favoured areas. The concerns of hill farmers will be fully taken into account in the development of policy affecting rural areas.

Mr. Clapham: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment to the Front Bench. In this afternoon's debate on the CAP, will he urgently address the issue of reform? Will he consider the ways in which the CAP is wasteful and unfair and how to redirect any resources saved as a result of reforms towards hill farmers and farmers in less-favoured areas such as those in my constituency?

Mr. Morley: I am aware that my hon. Friend represents some less-favoured areas. This is an important matter. Farmers in marginal areas should be supported. They will have expected to receive £650 million last year in subsidies for LFAs, which is equivalent to about £26,000 for each full-time LFA English cattle and sheep farmer. We intend to support those communities and we will ensure that their interests are protected in any reform of the CAP.

ATTORNEY–GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

29. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Attorney–General what measures he plans to introduce to reduce the time taken by the Crown Prosecution Service to bring cases to court. [2920]

The Attorney–General (Mr. John Morris): The Narey report put forward a number of proposals for reducing delay in the courts. The public consultation ended on 31 May and the Government are now looking closely at the proposals in light of the responses that they have received.

Mr. Bruce: I welcome the Attorney-General to his post. He faces a difficult situation in ensuring that the bottlenecks that have been identified in the CPS are sorted out. The right hon. and learned Gentleman will be surprised to know that his colleagues in the Home Office told me, when I stressed to them that resources should go from the Home Office to his Department to get the CPS moving, that they believe that the CPS has sufficient resources and that all that is needed is good management. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree?

The Attorney–General: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. I have to disappoint him, because there are no additional resources. As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have set up an independent review, whose terms of reference have been made known to the House. That may deal with some of the anxieties expressed by the hon. Gentleman in the latter part of his question.

Dr. Iddon: Will my right hon. and learned Friend please assure the House that the CPS will inform victims or relatives of victims when serious charges are downgraded, and give reasons for such downgrading?

The Attorney–General: The first part of my hon. Friend's suggestion, which I regard as particularly important, is under active consideration. As for the assertion that there has been undue downgrading, that will be considered, among other matters, by the independent review. I welcome my hon. Friend's observations.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I congratulate the right hon. and learned Gentleman on his appointment, and the Solicitor-General, in another place, on his. In that context, however, I note that, even with 418 Members, new Labour cannot find two Law Officers in this House.

In seeking to reduce the time that cases take to come to court—which the Opposition support—the Labour party has pledged to halve the time for persistent young offenders. What is the average current time that the right hon. and learned Gentleman proposes to halve?

On the proposal that the CPS, rather than the police, informs victims of prosecuting decisions—extra work, of course—who will do that work, and has the Attorney-General been promised the necessary resources by the Home Secretary or the Chancellor?

The Attorney–General: First, I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his kind words. In all the time that he held the office that I now have the honour to hold, he was unfailing in his courtesy and in the assistance that he gave me over the years, for which I thank him.

As regards the absence of another Law Officer, I am confident that the other place will be exceedingly well served by my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General—*[Interruption.]* I hear the comment from below the Gangway that one of ours is better than two of theirs. It would be very immodest of me to subscribe to that view, and I do not do so.

Much concern has been expressed about young offenders. I have expressed concern, as have my colleagues who take part in Home Affairs debates. The problem at the moment is that young offender cases may be referred to multi-agency panels or juvenile liaison bureaux before a decision on charging is made. That undoubtedly takes a lot of time. We want to shorten the time considerably to ensure that those against whom allegations of offending are made are brought to court speedily. The Government have set up a ministerial group on the fast-tracking of youth offenders. We will consider exceedingly urgently what can be done.

Mr. Asil Nadir

30. **Mr. Winnick:** To ask the Attorney–General what are his proposals in respect of the prosecution of Mr. Asil Nadir in the United Kingdom. [2921]

The Attorney–General: The central criminal court has issued a warrant for the arrest of Asil Nadir, and Interpol has been informed. The Serious Fraud Office intends to proceed against him on charges of theft when he returns, or is returned, to the jurisdiction.

Mr. Winnick: I do not suppose that Nadir mistook Turkey for Torquay.

I, too, welcome the Attorney-General to his position. What are the realistic chances that Asil Nadir will be brought to justice in this country? Will the Attorney-General promise today that he will try to persuade whoever is elected leader of the Tory party that all the stolen money that Nadir gave to the Tory party should be given to the appropriate authorities dealing with the liquidation? Would that not demonstrate that the Tory party is committed to the rule of law in practice?

The Attorney–General: I am sure that my hon. Friend is right to say that Turkey is not Torquay and that Mr. Nadir did not mistake the two places.

My hon. Friend will be aware that the Turkish authorities were requested by Interpol to arrest Nadir if he was found in Turkey. However, since Nadir is able to claim Turkish nationality and the Turkish constitution forbids the extradition of its nationals, the authorities there declined to arrest him. Therefore, I cannot, I fear, add to my hon. Friend's substantive point by giving him any realistic prospect as to when Nadir will be returned to the jurisdiction. Let me make it known—as my predecessor did—that, if Nadir does come here, he has nothing to fear from the English courts as regards a fair trial, which he will get at any time.

As for the use of any money given to any party, I have no responsibility for that whatever, and I am glad to say that.

Mr. Streeter: I also welcome the Attorney-General to his Front-Bench position. Does he recall that, when he and his colleagues were on the Opposition Benches, they used to maintain week after week that it was a very simple matter to get Asil Nadir returned to this country, and that the only reason why the Government did not achieve it was the alleged connection with party funding? Now that he and his colleagues are in government, why can he not be more decisive in solving a problem that he thought was so simple when he was in opposition? Has the legal position changed, or has the Labour party stumbled on the truth?

The Attorney–General: The hon. Gentleman is drawing on his imagination if he thinks for one moment that I ever suggested that this was a simple matter. As a lawyer, he must know the law and the extradition procedure. We do not recognise northern Cyprus, and therefore no extradition arrangement is in force. I have just told the House the present position on Turkey, and I have nothing to add. The legal position has not changed, as, I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows.

Mr. John D. Taylor: Did the Attorney-General see "The Cook Report" television programme on Asil Nadir, in which, contrary to one's expectations, the Serious Fraud Office and other agencies of the state, not Asil Nadir, were exposed for their deception and dishonesty? Is the Attorney-General satisfied that the agencies involved acted correctly?

The Attorney–General: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that I did not have the advantage of seeing that television programme—like many of us in this place, I did not have the time. However, I have received a full report on the programme which, I am told, did not present an accurate or balanced picture of the investigation into Polly Peck International plc. I can add nothing to that. It would be wrong for me or the SFO to comment on that case any further, because the matter is obviously sub judice.

Accountability

31. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Attorney–General what proposals he has to improve the accountability of his Department to Parliament. [2922]

The Attorney–General: I am accountable to Parliament for the work of each of my four Departments; namely, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Serious Fraud Office, the Treasury Solicitor's Department and my own secretariat. The Treasury Solicitor's Department is preparing an annual report and accounts. The Crown Prosecution Service, the Serious Fraud Office and the Government Property Lawyers agency will shortly submit to me their statutory annual reports.

Mr. Flynn: I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend, and fellow countryman, to his new responsibility. Will his accountability, and that of his Department, extend to the publication of local reports? Will he assure me that, where appropriate, those reports will be published in his mother tongue of Welsh?

The Attorney–General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his characteristically kind remarks. Currently, there are seven CPS branches in Wales, each of which published a bilingual report for the year ended 31 December 1996. As a constituency Member of Parliament, I have the report for the West Glamorgan branch. We propose to continue the system of local reports, and they will be in two languages—something that will give pleasure to my hon. Friend.

Mr. John M. Taylor: Given that we are to have 42 chief Crown prosecutors when there are currently 13, can we expect the CPS to publish prosecution figures on each police force area comparable to the Home Office statistics on recorded crime?

The Attorney–General: The details of what will be in each report will be a matter for the Director of Public Prosecutions. I can assure the hon. Gentleman, of whose interest I am aware, that the reports to be published in substance will not be less than what is done now. It is very important that the public in each locality should know what is happening, and that is why we have taken the speedy decision to ensure that there is appointed a Crown prosecutor comparable to, and covering an

equivalent-sized area to, a chief constable. The public will know who is the chief constable and who is the Crown prosecutor. I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman.

Serious Fraud Office

32. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the Attorney–General what plans he has to improve the effectiveness of the Serious Fraud Office. [2924]

The Attorney–General: The Serious Fraud Office continues to deter the incidence of serious and complex fraud through effective investigation and prosecution. I will, however, be looking at the scope for further improvements as part of the Government's comprehensive spending review.

Mr. Cohen: I welcome that answer. The Serious Fraud Office has had some fine successes, but also some expensive failures. Will my right hon. and learned Friend agree to beef up that organisation, with more accountants and more high-finance anti-fraud experts? Will he also consider putting a cap on legal aid, so that the taxpayer does not have to pay such huge funds to accused fraudsters?

The Attorney–General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I keep in close touch with the SFO. In the period for which figures are available, it had a conviction rate for defendants of 64 per cent. In the last year, nearly 86 per cent. of defendants were convicted.

From my professional experience, I know that many of the cases that the SFO has to tackle are difficult, many are complex and many need substantial investigation beforehand. They are not simple cases. I will, however, do my utmost, with the director of the SFO, to ensure that it continues to have what I regard as a satisfactory record, certainly in recent years.

Business of the House

3.30 pm

Mr. Alastair Goodlad (Eddisbury): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 23 JUNE—Second Reading of the Local Government (Contracts) Bill.

TUESDAY 24 JUNE—Proceedings on the Plant Varieties Bill.

Motion on the Solicitor General's Salary Order.

WEDNESDAY 25 JUNE—Until 2 pm, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Opposition Day [1st allotted day]—Until about 7 pm, there will be a debate on the future of the London Underground, followed by a debate on charging for NHS services. Both debates will arise on Opposition motions.

THURSDAY 26 JUNE—Until about 7 pm, motion on the Appropriation (No. 2) (Northern Ireland) Order.

FRIDAY 27 JUNE—Debate on sport for all on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

MONDAY 30 JUNE—Motion on the Northern Ireland Act 1974 (Interim Period Extension) Order.

Motion on the Satellite Television Service Regulations.

I hope that, on the following Tuesday, there will be a debate on the review of international development policies, on a motion for the Adjournment. Of course, we have already announced that Wednesday 2 July will be Budget day.

Mr. Goodlad: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving us the business for next week and provisionally for the week after.

When does the right hon. Lady expect the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges to be set up, since hon. Members share her concerns about allegations against colleagues? Will she also tell us whether she expects next week to be in a position to make progress with the establishment of the other Select Committees?

Can the right hon. Lady confirm that the House will have an early opportunity for a debate on the intergovernmental conference at Amsterdam, as soon it has had an opportunity to study the implications of what was negotiated? Will she tell us the likely timetable of the necessary legislation resulting from the IGC?

Is the right hon. Lady aware that the Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths), held a press conference this morning at which he announced the Government's intentions concerning controls on the use of fireworks? The issue is of concern to many people, and we would have expected a statement on it in the House; it should more properly have been made here than to the press.

Following today's publication of the National Audit Office's report, commissioned by the Chancellor, on the forecasts for public finances, can the Leader of the House confirm that the Chancellor will make a statement to the House next week? If she cannot, and as there is no indication that there will be time for a debate on that important matter next week, will she confirm that a debate will take place in the early part of the following week, and certainly before the Budget? Can she advise the House whether the previous Administration's policy documents were made available to the National Audit Office?

In view of the considerable speculation about the millennium exhibition project, and reports that, as long ago as mid-January, the Prime Minister gave Mr. Robert Ayling of British Airways an assurance that it would go ahead, might we expect a statement next week on the Government's intentions in that respect?

Mrs. Taylor: The first question was on the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges; the Government are ready with names for that Committee, and discussions are going ahead through the usual channels. I hope that we shall have all the names we need to table the motion to establish that Committee next week, and that other Select Committees will soon follow.

On the intergovernmental conference and the request for a debate, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it clear yesterday that legislation may be required, and that, if it is, the timetable for any debate will follow what is required in that respect. We do not at this stage see the need for any other debate; I presume that the Opposition also do not, as they could have had that in their time next Wednesday.

On the statement on fireworks by my hon. Friend the Minister with responsibility for consumer protection, I should have thought that all hon. Members would have welcomed his attempt to improve firework safety. I do not think that it was necessary to make a statement to the House on the tightening and extending of existing regulations.

I see no reason why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor should have to make a statement on the National Audit Office report, although many of the findings may be relevant to our Budget debate. As far as I am aware, the National Audit Office had access to all the documents that it required. If the shadow Leader of the House has any information to the contrary, we shall of course consider it.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is visiting Greenwich this afternoon, and he wants it to be possible for the millennium project to go ahead. In principle, we want the project to go ahead, but we are all well aware of the shambles that we inherited from the previous Government and of the fact that proper plans were not laid, so we have set out five tests that will have to be met. We believe that the plans should be rescued if at all possible.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I welcome tomorrow's debate on the Child Support Agency as a means for the House to have a full discussion before new legislation is drafted, perhaps in another Session of this Parliament. Could that tactic be followed with other items, such as the methodology that determines standard spending assessments? There is great interest in that in Derbyshire, as we have been seriously hit by the methods that were used in the past. If we have a full debate, it might influence what happens with next year's local government finance settlement.

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend has cleverly tried to marry questions on two subjects. It is right that we should

debate the Child Support Agency on a motion for the Adjournment, because hon. Members are concerned about its workings, as they have been since it started. Methodology and how to learn from the problems that arose are being discussed by the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons. At some stage, we hope to look at scrutiny of legislation, and its effectiveness once legislation has been passed. I hope that we can learn from tomorrow's debate, and find what mechanisms should be applied in future.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I thank the Leader of the House for providing details of business next week. When does she expect copies of the details of the outcomes of the Amsterdam treaty to appear in the Library?

Will it be possible to find time for an urgent debate on education finance, particularly in respect of schools? In considering that request, will the right hon. Lady bear in mind the enormous benefit of such a debate to the Government? There exists a considerable conundrum in the minds of many people. On the one hand, the Government have said that their first priority is education, education, education, but on the other the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have confirmed that the departmental spending targets of the previous Administration are to be adhered to and that there is to be no virement between one budget head and another.

The implication is that the increase in money available will be 1.2 per cent., when the money needed is more than 4 per cent., which means that, under the right hon. Lady's Administration, there will be real cuts in schools. Does she accept that such a debate will help to resolve the conundrum?

Mrs. Taylor: On the Amsterdam documents, I will try to make sure that there is no unnecessary delay, but obviously such documents are not always instantly available. I shall try to ensure that they are placed in the Library at the earliest possible time. On education finance, the Government have made it clear that, over time, we hope to move spending away from welfare towards education. On keeping to existing limits for the moment, the limits may be the same but the Government's priorities are different, as was shown by the Bill to abolish the assisted places scheme.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a brief debate on privatised transport next week? That could give us an opportunity to find out why Motorail has been replaced with a service whereby people travel on sleepers while their cars travel by road. One hopes that they reach the same destination at the same time, but it would be nice to know.

Mrs. Taylor: I am sure that my hon. Friend is right to say that there is concern about a range of such issues. If there were sufficient time, we should be happy to provide it for such a debate, but I am afraid that it will not be possible next week.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Does the right hon. Lady accept that it is not necessarily the content of the statement of the Minister responsible for consumer affairs that is causing concern, but the fact that he made it outside the House? Will she give an undertaking that all statements that involve significant change, as this one appears to, are made first, as a matter of courtesy, to this House?

Mrs. Taylor: I am sympathetic to the need for important statements to be made on the Floor, but if every change to regulations, on fireworks or anything else, was made by a statement on the Floor, little business would be done.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the appropriate Minister makes a statement about the scandal of homes built by the Coal Board and sold off to fly-by-night landlords and property speculators, who are using their power to create dereliction in mining communities? They are using the law courts to stop houses being demolished by local authorities in the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton), for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) and for Mansfield (Mr. Meale), and, I am sure, in many other coalfield areas.

It is high time that we had a Government statement saying what powers will be given to local authorities to ensure that landlords such as Dennis Rye in my constituency, who are creating havoc, are prevented from carrying on their dirty work.

Mrs. Taylor: I am not aware of all the details of the cases to which my hon. Friend refers, but he is obviously extremely worried, and says that there is a real problem there. I shall bring his remarks to the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): As the British fishing industry was sold down the river at Amsterdam, where the Government failed to do away with quota hopping, will the Leader of the House find time at an early date for a debate on the fishing industry?

Mrs. Taylor: My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food made a statement about fishing yesterday; as he said, the difficulties he faced were basically the situation that he inherited from the previous Government. If anyone sold people down the river, it was the previous Government.

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): On the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), do the Government intend to bring another housing Bill before the House to restore the powers of compulsory purchase, not at a market rate but for what houses are worth, which is nil in the areas to which my hon. Friend refers?

That would allow us to get proper control over private landlords, who have made a fortune out of the houses to which my hon. Friend refers, especially in Warsop Vale in my constituency. Many of the houses are derelict, because they have been vandalised and smashed up. The landlords will not do anything about them. The council cannot do anything about them. There is no money to do anything. Some places look like Beirut after the war, yet no one has any power or cash to restore a decent standard of living to those mining villages.

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend clearly states that there is a serious problem, as did my hon Friend the Member

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for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner). As I told my hon. Friend, I was not aware of all the details, and I shall ensure that Ministers are made aware of them.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): When the Prime Minister reported to the House yesterday on the outcome of the Amsterdam intergovernmental conference, he stated that certain concessions had been achieved for our fishermen, especially in relation to quota hoppers. As existing fishermen's licences state that 50 per cent. of the catch must be landed in British ports, it appears that one of the "concessions" to which he referred was not a concession but a repetition of existing practice. So that we can be absolutely sure whether the concessions are apparent or real, may we have a debate on the common fisheries policy at an early date?

Mrs. Taylor: I see no need for such a debate. The statement yesterday was clear. The problems that we inherited were significant. We now have a definitive statement from the President of the Commission on the action that we can now take to ensure that foreigner vessels maintain economic links with the United Kingdom. That is better than the previous Government ever got near to achieving.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): In Amsterdam, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was lent a bicycle, and we all saw how valuable bicycles were there. Would my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House perhaps care to consider and ask her Cabinet colleagues to consider that it might be time that we limited the nature and quality of the traffic that is allowed to use roads in our major cities, so that bicycling can become much more popular and much more effectively used as a means of transport?

Mrs. Taylor: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. We can all see a role in certain circumstances for bicycles, but there are limitations. There is not time for a debate on cycling next week.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The right hon. Lady has tabled a motion today for another meeting of the Scottish Grand Committee. Has she had any conversations with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as to whether a similar meeting might be called of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee to allow us to ask questions specific to our constituencies, and to debate the recently published review by the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights on fair employment practice?

Mrs. Taylor: I have had some discussions with my right hon. Friend, and she has had discussions with people in Northern Ireland. There have been a number of occasions recently on which Northern Ireland issues could be raised. In the business that I have announced today for next week and the following Monday, there are further opportunities.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): May I urge the Leader of the House to consider having two debates—first, on the creation of a Grand Committee for London, for which there is much support in this place and outside, and secondly, a debate of at least two days on Europe and the Amsterdam summit, for which there is also much support on both sides of the House? If the timetable is tight, perhaps we could have the debate towards the end of July, or even in the first week of August.

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I am afraid that I cannot hold out a great deal of hope on either count. In respect of a Grand Committee for London, legislation directly affecting London will be introduced later in this Parliament, when there will be plenty of opportunity to debate some of the issues about which my hon. Friend may be concerned. We shall consider what debates it will be possible to hold at the end of July, and whether we can fulfil my hon. Friend's request for a two-day debate on Europe, but I fear that the timetable may be crowded.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): Is it not extraordinary that the Leader of the House has said that there is to be no Government time next week for debating the outcome of the intergovernmental conference? Does she not recognise that that is a clear breach of the precedent set by the previous Government? When the previous Prime Minister returned from Maastricht, we had a full debate in the House within days of the conclusion of the Maastricht treaty. Is it not extraordinary that the Government are so ashamed of the Prime Minister's deal that the Leader of the House will not even agree to a two-day debate on Europe within the next month?

Mrs. Taylor: We had a full statement from the Prime Minister yesterday; we had a statement from my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on quota selling, which is a more appropriate description than quota hopping. The hon. Gentleman is plainly wrong: there has not always been a debate following conferences in Europe.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke–on–Trent, South): May I refer my right hon. Friend to early-day motion 94?

[*That this House condemns the continued occupation of Tibet and the persistent and continuing human rights abuses perpetrated against the Tibetan people by the Chinese authorities; and calls on the Government of the People's Republic of China to enter into negotiations with the Tibetan Government-in-exile without pre-conditions to respect and preserve the cultural identity of the Tibetan people, to permit Tibetans to freely practise and express their religious beliefs, to immediately end the use of torture, beatings and arbitrary detentions and to release the eight year old boy, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, recognised by the Dalai Lama as the 11th Panchen Lama, Tibet's second highest spiritual leader.*]

The early-day motion expresses concern at the continued repression and effective policy of destruction of the culture of the people of Tibet by the Chinese authorities. Allied to this is the effective kidnapping by the Chinese authorities of the 11th Panchen Lama. Given the undoubted and long-standing concerns on both sides of the House for human rights, will my right hon. Friend try to arrange a debate next week on that important issue?

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue, and I can understand why he wants time for a debate. We share the concern about human rights abuses in Tibet expressed in that motion, and we believe that a lasting

solution to the problem in Tibet can be achieved only through negotiations between the Chinese authorities and the Tibetan people. I understand why my hon. Friend would like a debate, but I do not think that there will be time for one next week.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): While I recognise the problems faced by the Leader of the House in establishing Select Committees until events have been decided upstairs later this afternoon, may I ask her to consider urgently re-establishing the Select Committee on European Legislation, which has the authority to scrutinise all documents that come through this place, be they specifically on the common agricultural policy or the common fisheries policy or events that may occur as a result of the Amsterdam summit? That is an urgent matter that must be addressed by the House so that we can undertake that scrutiny.

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Lady is right to say that that is an important issue, and it is one on which we want to move as quickly as possible. She is also right to say that events later this afternoon may have a bearing on it. We have been able to provide for scrutiny of some of the documents linked to the debate that we had before the Amsterdam summit. The hon. Lady is right to say that we should move on the issue as quickly as we can.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): May I thank the shadow Leader of the House for responding to the point of order last week and reducing the number of questions that he asked—from the totally unreasonable number of 21 a fortnight ago to 16 last week, to a modest and reasonable seven today?

Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House arrange an early debate on the subject discussed in the pensioners parliament in Blackpool yesterday, which is the subject of early-day motion 1?

[*That this House celebrates with joy and hope the election of what will be a great reforming Labour Government; applauds its manifesto declaration that 'all pensioners should share fairly in the increasing prosperity of the nation'; asserts that this can be achieved for the present generation of pensioners only by restoring the link between basic pensions and average earning; urges an immediate start to the promised manifesto review of 'all aspects of the basic pension and its value, second pensions including SERPS and community care' and a renewal of the commitment to retain SERPS.*]

The motion draws attention to the need to ensure that pensioners share in the nation's increasing prosperity. We could then draw attention to the fact that, if the promise made by the previous Government in 1979 had been kept, the current basic pension would be not £62 a week, but £87 a week. Can we debate how the present Government, when they have been in power for 18 years, will be able to tell the House that they have honoured that promise?

Mrs. Taylor: As my hon. Friend knows, a number of people share his concern about the difficulties faced by many pensioners, especially some who are on extremely low incomes and do not even claim all that they are entitled to. The National Pensioners Convention has an excellent record of championing the interests of all our older citizens. My hon. Friend will know that the Government are conducting a review of key areas of insecurity for elderly people, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security will make announcements in due course.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Just over half an hour ago, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food announced that he had not sought a timetable for the lifting of the beef ban, nor indeed was he seeking one. May we have an urgent debate on the problems facing the beef industry?

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman was present, and heard what my right hon. Friend the Minister said. He also knows of the difficulties created by the last Government, and knows why my right hon. Friend thought it would be foolhardy to adopt the simplistic approach that some Opposition Members seem to be adopting.

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on how to improve the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service, and in particular how to improve co-ordination between the activities of the police and those of the CPS, without undermining the independence of the CPS, in order to make inroads into the appalling statistic that only one crime in 50 results in a conviction?

Mrs. Taylor: Perhaps I should remind my hon. Friend that Home Office questions will be tabled on Monday. He may be able to make some progress then. Although I sympathise with his concern about the problem that he has raised—many of us have dealt with constituency cases in which it has arisen—I am afraid that I cannot hold out any hope of a debate about it next week.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): Local education authorities have been asked by circular to submit their proposals for the organisation of nursery education in their areas by 1 July. Given that those proposals would come into effect on 1 September, may I ask when we are likely to be able to debate the Government's proposals for nursery education?

Mrs. Taylor: As the hon. Gentleman may know, the deadlines to which he refers are for the interim plans. There is a fallback scheme for authorities that will not be able to have the plans in place by September. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to ask more about this subject, he will be able to do so next Thursday at Education and Employment questions.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): May I warmly welcome the proposed debate on international development, which will provide a genuine opportunity for us to debate international development issues? It will have a huge impact on the understanding of international development issues in this country, and it could also have a huge impact on the lives and conditions of millions of people around the globe.

Mrs. Taylor: I am glad that my hon. Friend is pleased that we are to have that debate. It is part of the extensive consultative process that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is

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conducting, which will lead to the production of a White Paper on the subject in the autumn. My right hon. Friend feels that it would be extremely helpful to her if she could take hon. Members' views into account.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I welcome the opportunity for us to debate London Underground on an Opposition motion next Wednesday, which I hope will reveal what an incredible increase in investment has taken place since the 1970s. I also welcome the Government's decision to issue a consultation paper shortly, before establishing a Greater London authority or an elected mayor, if that is the will of Londoners.

Will the right hon. Lady confer with the appropriate Ministers to ensure that the Government's position on the management of London Underground is made plain at the beginning of Wednesday's debate? Will she ask, for example, whether they intend the new Greater London authority or the elected mayor to oversee London Transport and London Underground, and whether they have it in mind to privatise London Underground?

Mrs. Taylor: The Minister who opens that debate will make a statement about his position. The hon. Gentleman's point could be made on Wednesday.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): In respect of Wednesday's debate on London Underground, will my right hon. Friend convey to the Minister with responsibility for transport in London the hope that she will be able to come to the Dispatch Box and join me and others in accusing Opposition Members, including the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman), of supporting and acquiescing in a situation in which the Association of Train Operating Companies intends to clobber 430,000 travellers in London and the south-east of England who use network cards?

Those travellers will have to endure a massive hike in the price of those cards, thus substantially disadvantaging them and diminishing London Underground revenue. It is a scandal, and on Wednesday we will have an opportunity to accuse the guilty men and women who have brought this about.

Mrs. Taylor: I can confirm that the Government are pleased to have a debate on London Underground. My hon. Friend knows the problems that have built up over the past decade or so, and the debate will provide an opportunity to explain our inheritance on taking office.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Will the right hon. Lady request the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to make a statement next week announcing a decision on the issue of the age of transfer between schools in Buckinghamshire? She will know that this matter has been raised before by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), and will understand that schools that are due to admit extra classes need time to prepare and to have classrooms built. A decision is urgently needed, and I should be grateful if the Leader of the House would report that to her right hon. Friend.

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman will know that his hon. Friend has raised this with me on a couple of occasions. I have inquired about it. The proposals are far more complex than was previously suggested, and the Department is not fully in a position to respond to them. However, the local education authority recently wrote to the Department stating that it needs a decision by the end of July. I think that that might be possible.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): A statement by the Prime Minister in the absence of Amsterdam treaty texts is no substitute for proper scrutiny and cross-examination on that issue. Would the right hon. Lady clarify an earlier remark? Does she agree that no self-respecting Leader of the House could contemplate remaining in a Government who handed over the powers of the House on the royal prerogative, and that therefore a Bill must go through both Houses and receive Royal Assent before the Amsterdam treaty is ratified? Will she make that absolutely clear?

Mrs. Taylor: I spoke about legislation on the matter in reply to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), who speaks for the Liberal Democrat party. The Prime Minister made a very full statement, and there was a great deal of cross-examination on it.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): In view of some answers by the right hon. Lady and her right hon. Friends about the previous Government, could she make a statement next week about when we might expect a timetable for the moment at which the Government will, for the first time, begin to take responsibility for their own actions?

Mrs. Taylor: We are certainly not taking responsibility for the actions and problems of the previous Government.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Would the right hon. Lady consider a debate next week or at an early date on the public policy implications of the dumping of food and meat products? Those meat products are not contaminated, but have apparently been on sale. That would give the House an opportunity to examine the concerns of my constituents, who found dumped on one site food which seems in every sense to be fit for public consumption. Perhaps the hon. Lady could find time for a debate on that, because it would be of interest to hon. Members on both sides of the House. *[Interruption.]*

Mrs. Taylor: There will be a debate on agriculture this very afternoon. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who has heard the hon. Gentleman, is right to point out to me that the hon. Gentleman is complaining about the policy that was adopted by his own Government some time ago.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): It has been widely reported that the Israeli Government are thinking of making it a criminal offence for anyone even to own a New Testament. Given the fact that that would be a scandalous violation of human rights, would it be possible to have a statement on whether that is the case, and, if it is, what the Government propose to do to bring influence to bear on the Israeli Government?

Mrs. Taylor: I cannot answer for the Israeli Government, and I do not think that there would be much useful purpose in having such a debate in the House.

Points of Order

4.5 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I have given you and the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) notice of this matter. Last week, I was surprised to open my local paper in Eastbourne to discover that the hon. Gentleman, with my defeated Liberal Democrat opponent at the recent election, had presented a petition, signed by my constituents, about my local hospital to the Department of Health.

I am sure that you would agree, Madam Speaker, that, at the very least, that is a gross departure from the normal courtesies of the House, and may even breach parliamentary protocol. However, given the fact that the hon. Gentleman is a new Member, you may wish simply to clarify the position for all our benefit, and perhaps point out to him, as a new Member, the way in which we do things in the House.

Madam Speaker: I am delighted to clarify the position, and to inform the hon. Gentleman and the House that it is not a point of order or a matter for me.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Will you look into the question whether the powers of the House are going to be transferred by royal prerogative to European Community institutions, rather than the Amsterdam treaty being ratified with the authority of a parliamentary Act of Parliament, because whether that would be legal and whether it would be your duty to intervene in the process would be very serious questions to raise?

Madam Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, that is a matter for the Leader of the House and for the usual channels, but I assure him and the House that I shall not fail in my duty in that respect, and that I will consider the matter to satisfy my own interest, curiosity and conscience.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. By her answer regarding fireworks and this morning's government by press conference, the Leader of the House implied that firework safety is trivial. There cannot be one hon. Member whose constituents think that.

Madam Speaker: That is not a point of order. I can see the anger and frustration that is now rising in the House, and I am going to move on to the next business.

Common Agricultural Policy

[Relevant documents: European Community Documents Nos. 9550/96, relating to a support system for producers of arable crops, 9876/96, relating to ewe and suckler cow premium schemes, 5617/97, relating to the Court of Auditors Special Report No. 1/97, and 6112/97, relating to agri-monetary adjustment.]

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

4.7 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Dr. John Cunningham): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of European Community Document No. 6627/97, relating to agricultural prices for 1997–98; welcomes the Government's intention to negotiate an outcome which reflects the interests of United Kingdom consumers, taxpayers and food and farming industries; and welcomes the Government's longer term aim of securing reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy which reduce food prices, save money and provide more targeted support for the rural economy and enhance the rural environment.

I welcome the opportunity to debate the common agricultural policy so early in this Parliament. It demonstrates the importance that this country, the Government and the House attach to agriculture. It also provides a chance for the House to scrutinise and to debate the European Commission's CAP price proposals for 1997-98. Those may be decided at next week's Agriculture Council meeting in Luxembourg.

The debate is primarily about agriculture policy, but first I should like to say a word about the wider aspects of agriculture and the new approach that we are taking at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Our farming and food industries are essential and dynamic sectors of our economy. I am delighted to have the opportunity to work with them and with farmers in my Copeland constituency. The safety and quality of food are vital issues that reach into every home. The Ministry has key tasks to perform on food safety, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, animal welfare, biodiversity and many others. Those are all important issues to which the Government attach a high priority.

We have, of course, inherited some difficult problems from the previous Administration. Some, if not all, of them are directly due to the decisions of previous Ministers and their approach to agriculture matters at both domestic and European level. Those problems will not be solved quickly or easily. However, it is clear that, through a constructive approach at European level, we have already made more progress in seven weeks than the previous Government did in as many years. Those deep-seated problems were never going to be solved by the previous Administration's approach. Their splits and divisions on Europe, as alive this afternoon as before the general election, made it impossible for Britain to play a full and constructive role. British consumers and farmers alike have suffered because of the Tory failures in Europe.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way so early in his speech. Does he accept that no one would seriously criticise him for not having come back from Amsterdam with a firm timetable for the lifting of the beef ban? However, to stand at the Dispatch Box, as he did earlier,

[Mr. Patrick Nicholls]

and say that he has not even sought to reach an agreement on a timetable will suggest to the farming community that, apart from brave words, he simply does not care.

Dr. Cunningham: I rather regret having given way to the hon. Gentleman. First, I was not at Amsterdam, so he was wrong about that. Secondly, I am actively seeking an agreement. He was also wrong to suggest that it would be sensible to seek a date, especially this early in a new Administration and with the manifest failures of the Conservative Government so fresh in our minds. In case the hon. Gentleman has forgotten what I said barely an hour ago, his Government promised to have the beef ban lifted by last November. They had not made enough progress to get it lifted by the time the British people rightly drove them out of office, for that and many other failures.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Cunningham: No, I am not giving way for the moment.

By forgoing constructive partnerships throughout Europe, the Conservative Government made a difficult situation worse. I have begun to build coalitions and to make progress on issues close to the hearts of many British people. To give just one example, our initiative during the intergovernmental conference on animal welfare recognises animals as "sentient beings", and from now on that will be a feature of all European Union common agricultural policy legislation. It will ensure that European legislation takes account of this Government's desire to see the highest possible standards of animal welfare. We have also made some progress on fishing, as I reported to the House yesterday, and we are working urgently on the beef ban.

As well as a fresh approach in Europe, I have already announced my intention to reorganise the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food with a new mission statement, new name and new direction. I shall create an open, forward-looking Department, responsive to the needs of consumers and trusted to safeguard the health and well-being of the people and their environment. We are already making fundamental changes in the consumer interest, working towards the creation of an independent food standards agency. This is a Department that will look to the future, not the past.

I come now to the common agricultural policy price proposals. I shall say more about food safety in a moment. First, I want to speak about the CAP and the 1997–98 price proposals that are the main subject of today's motion.

The price support and aid rates set by the Agriculture Council each year under the CAP are a major determinant of farming activity in this country. This year's price proposals involve little change from the current position. Most price and aid levels are maintained. The main changes concern largely technical reductions in monthly increments in the cereals, rice and sugar sectors.

The Commission has reiterated its proposal from last year to reduce arable aids by an average of 7 per cent. It has argued that that is necessary to ensure that the budgetary limits are respected, especially in 1997. However, the position for this year has now eased considerably. I am disappointed that the Commission did not propose more radical changes in CAP support in this prices package. The CAP still absorbs some £30 billion of European taxpayers' money a year.

Next week, I shall be arguing in Luxembourg for the Council to adopt all the savings that the Commission has proposed. I particularly hope that the Council will take careful note of the over-compensation of arable farmers that has been highlighted by my Ministry and by the Commission, in Brussels. The over-compensation for the price cuts agreed in 1992 strengthens our case for reducing the arable aid rates. Even if the Council is not ready to adopt the cuts at that meeting, the issue of over-compensation will be important when we reform the cereals regime later this year. I am determined that the issue should remain on the agenda.

In recent years, the Commission has recognised the desirability of giving farmers an early indication of the set-aside rate that they will receive in the coming season, enabling them to plan their plantings in good time. I shall be pressing for that action at next week's Council. The set-aside rate should be as low as possible, and preferably no higher than this year's rate of 5 per cent. I also intend to urge the Commission to change the rules, so that set-aside can make a more effective environmental contribution.

Reform of the common agricultural policy is a major plank of the Government's European policy. The current common agricultural policy is highly unsatisfactory, because it costs a great deal, artificially raises food costs for consumers and burdens our farmers with bureaucracy and production controls. The policy is also highly susceptible to fraud. The CAP must be made more relevant to all our citizens—to consumers, farmers and taxpayers alike.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I apologise for missing the start of the right hon. Gentleman's speech, but activities elsewhere detained me. May I ask him—I have given him notice of the question—about the situation facing one of my constituents, who will be penalised to the tune of £35,000 for a simple administrative error that will not cost the Exchequer anything? When the Minister talks to the Commission about CAP reform, will he suggest the possibility of being a bit more flexible when genuine errors occur in EU schemes?

Dr. Cunningham: It is news to me that the hon. Gentleman gave me notice of that intervention, although he may have called the Ministry in my absence. He is referring to the case of Mr. G. J. Phillips and his Farm Partnership. That matter was dealt with in another place, on 12 June 1997, in a letter from the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Donoughue. I have nothing to add to that reply.

As I said, the CAP must be made more relevant and responsive to all our citizens. The previous Administration sat back and allowed the status quo to continue for many years, and no one should have any illusions about their failure or—because of the position of isolation in Europe that we have inherited—about the difficulties of securing CAP reform. Reform will be a long and tortuous process. The new Government, however,

are at least prepared to embark on reform, whereas the previous one did not even get the issues to the starting line.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Cunningham: No; not at the moment.

I intend to work hard with my European partners to identify reforms to reduce the overall cost of the CAP. Reform will also enable the United Kingdom's efficient farming industry to exploit its national advantages in European and world markets. A move to a more market-oriented policy will be widely welcomed in the UK and will enable European farmers to compete more effectively in increasingly open world markets.

Crucially, reform will also assist entry into the EU of the central European countries that have applied for membership.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Cunningham: I am sorry, but I cannot give way at the moment. I must press on as this is a very short debate.

A first step towards achieving those goals will be the European Commission's Agenda 2000 papers, to be published next month. They will prepare the ground for the next enlargement of the European Union. A key element will be the Commission's analysis of the future of the CAP. The papers will examine the three most expensive CAP regimes—cereals, beef and dairy—as well as rural development policy. I want more and better targeted schemes to help the rural economy and the rural environment.

In the face of anticipated international trading pressures and EU enlargement, reform is inevitable. I am pressing the Agriculture Commissioner, Mr. Fischler, to follow up Agenda 2000 as quickly as possible with concrete proposals to the Council. I will also use my presidency of the Agriculture Council, which begins next January, to give those proposals a powerful impetus. It is important for the Council to put the reforms in place early so that all our farmers have ample time to prepare.

I should like briefly to mention two wider agricultural issues, which will be central to my Department's work in the coming months. They are the implementation of the James report on food standards and the problems of BSE.

I have already made clear my commitment to protect the interests of consumers and to introduce greater openness and transparency into the business of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The Government are building fundamentally new arrangements for handling food safety and standards. We are already making progress in taking forward our plans for the food standards agency based on the proposals put forward by Professor James, to whom I express the Government's thanks. I have made changes within MAFF to prepare for the creation of that new agency and established a new food standards and safety group to bring together many of its functions. The first phase of public consultation on Professor James's report on possible structures and the remit for the agency ends tomorrow. The Government's intention is to issue a White Paper in the autumn with a view to publishing a draft Bill as soon as possible thereafter.

There is little doubt that some of the events of recent years have massively reduced consumer confidence in the safety and standards of our food. There is no room for complacency by anyone, whether on farms, in food processing and preparation activities or, for that matter, in the Ministry itself. We shall insist on and enforce the highest standards in abattoirs and food processing. Industry and consumers alike called for an independent food standards agency, but the previous Government failed to respond, despite all the evidence. This work is being given the highest priority by my colleagues and myself, and we shall give every opportunity to the House and the people to discuss our proposals openly, to criticise and to propose changes where it is thought appropriate.

I should also like to give the House a brief update on the BSE situation following my statement last week on the question of removing the ban on British beef exports. Officials have held talks with the Commission about the criticisms that the Scientific Veterinary Committee has made of the proposals for a certified herds scheme, proposals made by the previous Administration, which we have sustained and supported. The Commission has offered some constructive advice and will clearly do what it can to help us make progress.

Our task is to consider urgently how best to respond to the scientific criticisms. Our aim is to table further proposals in Brussels, which I hope will stand a good chance of winning support, both from the scientific experts and from the Governments of the European Union. We are determined to sustain pressure for an early lifting of the export ban. That is in the interests of all beef producers across the United Kingdom, and I assure the House that it is and will remain at the top of our agenda.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Does the Minister agree that the serious problem that he is trying to face up to, as the previous Government did, would be easier to resolve if he and other Ministers in Europe were willing to look at the chronic problem of the blatant over-production of beef in Europe—it is increasing almost every week—and the reducing consumer market?

Dr. Cunningham: I am happy to agree with the hon. Gentleman that there is over-production, not just of beef, but of cereals and dairy products. The need for reform of the CAP in all those areas is staring us in the face. The economic realities of life will bear down on us sooner or later because of the requirements of the World Trade Organisation, the necessary changes for the enlargement of the European Union and simply because, if we continue as at present, we shall price ourselves out of the opportunity to get high-value European Union products into growing world markets. I agree that a fundamental restructuring of the production of beef, cereals and milk is essential to the success and economic well-being of our farmers.

Mr. David Heath: Does the Minister agree that a major structural reform of the CAP is an essential prerequisite of the enlargement of the European Union? Does he also agree that more progress on enlargement at the Amsterdam summit, where very little was achieved, would have served as a motor for the reforms that he is suggesting?

Dr. Cunningham: I endorse what the hon. Gentleman says about the need for reform. I have said it many times

[Dr. Cunningham]

today. We are strong supporters of the enlargement of the European Union. We shall not do anything to hinder it. If the hon. Gentleman is disappointed about the lack of progress on enlargement at Amsterdam, he should direct his attention elsewhere in Europe to find the cause. He will not find it in the proposals or the attitudes of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and this Administration.

On 2 June, the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee recommended that unless the Community introduced EU-wide measures on specified risk materials, we should take unilateral action against beef imports. It specifically recommended extending the UK's controls on sheep and goat materials to include those proposed by the Commission in 1996—the removal of the spleen from sheep and goats older than six months and of the spinal cord from sheep and goats older than one year. It also recommended that, in the absence of Community measures, we should apply our existing controls on specified bovine materials to imports.

I reconfirm to the House that that is our intention. I should much prefer the European Union to endorse the proposals that Commissioner Fischler, to his credit, has retabled. The proposals have the support of Mr. Van Aartsen, the current President of the Agriculture Council, whom I met for discussions on those issues again yesterday. I believe that they also have the support of the appropriate Committees in the European Parliament. It is for our European colleagues to take that wide-ranging advice and act on it. I hope that they will, but if they do not, I shall table the four orders that we have already drafted—they are in my office now—to ensure that beef and bovine products imported from countries where BSE exists are subject to the same rigorous health safeguards as British-produced beef.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I back the right hon. Gentleman on that, but I have one qualification. He confined the proposed prohibition to countries in which BSE exists. Beef can travel within the European Union single market. The absence of confirmed cases in one country does not mean that beef or beef products from that country come from cattle free of BSE.

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for raising that important point. The orders that I intend to lay would make it an offence to import beef into this country from a country where BSE existed, but where the beef had not been subject to the same rigorous controls on the removal of specified risk materials. It will therefore be the responsibility of importers to ensure that the beef that they import is identified by country of origin and has been so treated. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman has raised an important question, I shall double-check with my officials to ensure that that is so.

As I said on 5 June, we are determined to ensure that any beef imported into the UK meets the very high standards that we have set our industry, and which, to their credit, our producers are ensuring are enforced. I should stress that measures proposed in respect of sheep are purely precautionary. There is no evidence at all that BSE occurs in the national flock, but, again, we are operating on the advice of SEAC on the safety-first principle.

The Government are also committed to action to ensure that BSE is eradicated completely. The number of new cases of BSE has fallen to about 100 a week compared with 1,000 a week at its height in 1993. The level is now at its lowest for eight years. As the House knows, there are independent forecasts that, taking into account maternal transmission, the disease in the UK will be close to extinction by 2001. However, those are forecasts and no more than that. We shall certainly do everything that we can in government to ensure that that becomes a reality—then, if not sooner.

There has been some speculation in the farming press that we might be considering relaxing the ban on the feeding of meat and bonemeal to pigs and poultry. Such action is out of the question. We have no intention of revoking the measures that were rightly introduced by the previous Administration, and we shall uphold them firmly and effectively.

I refer to the amendment tabled by the Opposition, which Madam Speaker has selected. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Cunningham: I am happy to do so.

Mr. Dawson: My right hon. Friend has made some serious commitments on dealing with the monstrously difficult and dangerous issue of BSE contamination. We must all be impressed by his determination to deal with the aspects that he has discussed.

One element that my right hon. Friend did not cover—I thought that he was going to touch on it, but he turned to the amendment—is what we shall do with material that is mainly in a rendered state and predominantly from animals culled under the over-30-months scheme, which is being stored in its hundreds of thousands of tonnes around the country. I should very much appreciate a word from my right hon. Friend on that. I am sure that he will agree that it is absolutely vital to deal with such material safely and effectively and to dispose of it once and for all in ways that do not threaten people's health and well-being, especially for those who live in areas surrounding animal rendering plants.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): That was a good intervention, but perhaps the next one could be brief.

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson).

Mr. Hogg: The right hon. Gentleman has found his brief.

Dr. Cunningham: I have now found the amendment, which I had temporarily misplaced. I do not need any briefing on the amendment. It does not merit briefing.

First, I happily respond to the important point raised by my hon. Friend. I can assure him that all processes, including novel ones, will need to satisfy statutory environmental requirements. The Intervention Board will let contracts only with companies that obtain the necessary statutory consents, which aim to ensure that waste is disposed of without endangering human health

or harming the environment. As I have implied, that is a matter for the Intervention Board rather than for me as Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, but I assure the House that there is no intention of moving from those stringent requirements.

The amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition need detain the House only briefly. It is a piece of remarkable effrontery. To suggest that, after seven weeks in office, the Government should be criticised for not making sufficient progress in the lifting of the export ban, which is the result of the Conservative Government's ineptitude, can be described only as vacuous effrontery. *[Interruption.]* As I said, I do not need any briefing to deal with this piece of nonsense.

The amendment also suggests that we have not made enough progress on speeding up the selective cull. The previous Administration said that they would implement the selective cull. They delayed implementing it until March this year. That is the record. I well recall from recent exchanges Conservative Members expressing the view that they did not wish to be reminded of their Government's record. I can understand that. But one thing is sure: having had so many opportunities in office to deal with these things and having failed, Conservative Members should be the last people to table such amendments and to complain about the circumstances faced by our beef farmers, because the situation is all their responsibility.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): The Minister will recall that last week, during his statement on UK beef exports, he referred to two telephone conversations that he had had with the two European Commissioners, as a result of which he felt hopeful. What precisely led him to be hopeful last week, which could inform today's debate?

Dr. Cunningham: Both Commissioners immediately agreed that their officials and MAFF officials should sit down to secure answers to the questions raised by the Scientific Veterinary Committee. It is important to draw the distinction that that was not a Commission decision but a committee of experts decision, which is a report to the Commission. The Commission says that it wants to help us to find answers to the questions raised by the Scientific Veterinary Committee. That is a helpful response. It might have said that it was not interested in answers to those questions because the scheme will now fail as a result of the report. But it did not say that, and that is what gave me some cause for hope. I do not want to exaggerate it, but, as I have said, we have been talking ever since and my officials have had talks in Brussels on that subject this week. We shall continue to work with the Commission in the hope that the certified herds scheme—the proposal, I emphasise, of the previous Administration—can be accepted and implemented in the United Kingdom. If we can achieve it, that will be a small but significant first step in the raising of the ban.

In conclusion, everyone involved in the agriculture and food industries must understand that high standards of food production, the health and confidence of consumers and the success of British agriculture are all inextricably linked. The Government are dedicated to ensuring the success of British agriculture and the highest quality and standards for our consumers and the environment. I am confident that the industry has the robustness, determination and skills to face the challenges positively and to come through them stronger and better able to compete. I commend the motion to the House.

4.39 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I beg to move, to leave out from "1997-98" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"but notes that the Government has made no progress in lifting the export ban on United Kingdom beef and beef products; and urges that greater effort be made to speed up the selective cull now to meet the concerns raised by the EU Scientific Veterinary Committee over the implementation of the proposed Export Certified Herd Scheme and to consider alternative schemes which offer a real prospect of EU agreement to commence the lifting of the ban as soon as possible."

This is but a three-hour debate, and you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will wish me to be brief; I shall seek to oblige.

We have just heard the first substantive speech on agriculture that the new Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has made from the Front Bench. It coincides with my last.

Dr. John Cunningham: The right hon. and learned Gentleman looks happy about it.

Mr. Hogg: I always look happy.

The right hon. Gentleman will find his period in office interesting. He will also find it frustrating: because of the nature of the common agricultural policy, most of the decisions for which he has nominal responsibility in this country are shaped and determined by the European Council.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will not be the last Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I say that because I am aware that there are within the Labour party a number of policies which, if adopted, would spell the end of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and that would be a serious blow to the British farming industry. Therefore, for personal reasons—and for wider ones—I wish him well in his responsibilities.

The price proposals that are set out in the documents before the House are, as the right hon. Gentleman said, unremarkable. They are much as to be expected, in the context of the decisions that have been taken and the rather tight budgetary circumstances that exist. I have few comments to make on the price proposals.

I welcome what the right hon. Gentleman said about the set-aside rates for the planting season 1997–98: that it is important to obtain from the Council a clear sign of the proposed rate as soon as possible, because farmers need certainty. I have no difficulty with a rate of 5 per cent. or thereabouts.

When the right hon. Gentleman considers the price proposals, I hope that he will keep it in mind that 1997 is likely to be a difficult financial year for British farming. There are many reasons for that, but the revaluations will have a serious impact on profitability. Two points are worth making. First, as the House will recall, as a result of the decisions that I took when I was Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, most of the direct support payments will retain, for a time, their pre-revaluation value—that is important—but there is a possibility, I put it no higher than that, of making a compensation payment in respect of loss of income.

[Mr. Hogg]

I made it plain, during the election and before, that I would press the European Union to establish a fund, although at that stage I was not able to give a commitment to make a payment from that fund. That is the right position to take. Indeed, it is the position that the right hon. Gentleman has taken in answer to questions.

Dr. John Cunningham *indicated assent.*

Mr. Hogg: The right hon. Gentleman is nodding, so there is no point in hon. Members on the Government Benches laughing.

What will happen is that the National Farmers Union will make a claim at the back end of this year. The case for compensation, because of the extent and the number of revaluations, is now greater than it was at the beginning of the year, and therefore I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will give sympathetic consideration to what is said to him.

The right hon. Gentleman has outlined in brief form the case for reform of the common agricultural policy, and I wholly agree with what he said. To us in this country, the case for common agricultural policy reform appears overwhelming. The policy itself is indeed old-fashioned. It has created an economy that is tightly regulated, tightly controlled, featherbedded and extremely protectionist. It is expensive, yet it has not delivered higher living standards to many who make a living from farming, or to many—perhaps even more important—who live in rural areas. It has had a profoundly prejudicial effect both on the environment and on food prices. It is also, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) said earlier, deeply wasteful.

Moreover—this is a point that the right hon. Gentleman will focus on when he has been in the Agriculture Council for some time—the mechanisms for policy making are profoundly unsatisfactory. They are deeply intrusive into the way in which farmers and the food industry carry out their business. In truth, most of the those who sit around the Council table, and most of the people who advise those who do so, have but a very slight knowledge of the practical consequences of the policies on which they are asked to vote. The case for change is, for a variety of reasons, overwhelming.

The right hon. Gentleman said in broad terms that he is seeking a market-driven economy in which farmers produce what the market wants and at a price that the market is prepared to pay. I share his view. I make a further point. We should incorporate an agricultural policy into an overarching policy for the rural areas. Agriculture and agricultural policy is a critical element in any policy for rural areas. It is not to be underrated. *[Interruption.]* I shall explain why I did not do it in a moment. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] But it is not the only policy. Other policies need to be taken into account—for example, relating to the environment, social questions, infrastructure, diversification and so on.

During my time, and that of my predecessors in the Ministry, we incorporated a number of policies into the framework, for example objective 5b. What is lacking is the overarching approach, which I deem to be extremely important. If the right hon. Gentleman is able to produce a policy for the countryside, he will have my support and that of my right hon. and hon. Friends. It will be subject to provisos, of course. The overall cost must not exceed the cost of the existing budget. There needs to be a high degree of subsidiarity. It is important that we should not accept regulations that are unlikely to be as tightly enforced in Europe as in the United Kingdom. It is important, too, that we emphasise the principle that all payments that are made should have their purpose clearly stated; should be capable of being properly monitored; should be justified against precise criteria; and in the end should be funded by the taxpayer, not the consumer.

On all those policies, the right hon. Gentleman will have the support of most of the House, but he will find that he lacks allies in Europe. That is why progress has been so difficult and slow. The case for fundamental change in the common agricultural policy is not a popular cause among the Agriculture Ministers in Europe. On the general issue, he will find support from Commissioner Fischler. I recognise that fact and commend Commissioner Fischler for his attitude.

In general terms, the right hon. Gentleman will probably find support from the Swedes, sometimes from the Dutch, sometimes from the Danes. On specific matters, he will be able to forge alliances, for example with the Italians on milk quotas, but—this is the important point always to keep in mind—there is no general support within the Agriculture Council for root-and-branch reform. There will be reform—there has been reform—but it is always pushed by events rather than by a rational discussion of what should be. Some events are already in place and there will be more: the existing budgetary constraints, the commitments that we have taken under the general agreement on tariffs and trade, the likely commitments that we will take under the World Trade Organisation talks that are soon to start and, of course, enlargement. However, the process of reform will be gradual, frustratingly slow and always driven by events, rather than by rational decision making.

The Minister will find that there is a deeply held view within the Council that matters agricultural should be exclusively matters for the Agriculture Council itself.

Dr. John Cunningham: Nonsense.

Mr. Hogg: I am glad to hear the Minister say that. It is a terrible error.

Dr. Cunningham: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman, who is making a good speech, for his kind remarks about me taking this office. I suspect that many of the problems that he faced in Europe were not of his own making, but were the creation of the former Prime Minister and the former Foreign Secretary. He had to live with the consequences of what they said and did. I was not describing his comments as nonsense—I was agreeing with him. It is nonsense to leave huge expenditures to the Agriculture Council, and they should be on the agenda of ECOFIN and other ministerial Councils.

Mr. Hogg: I had so interpreted the Minister. When he talks to colleagues in the Council on enlargement, he will find that many Agriculture Ministers would prefer to retain the CAP as is, even if that were to prevent enlargement from taking place. I hope that he will come to the conclusion that it is important to involve Chancellors, Presidents, Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers—and those yet greater than Agriculture Ministers—in the issue.

There are four specific points that I would like to make on the documents. First is the question of modulation. The Minister has made the point that I wanted him to make—that policies of modulation would be very much contrary to the interests of the United Kingdom and must be resolutely resisted. My right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) achieved a great victory on that matter in 1992.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): It is important that somebody makes the point that opposition to modulation is not universal within the United Kingdom. In the Farmers Union of Wales—and, I think, among many members of the National Farmers Union in Wales—there is strong support for the principle of modulation. I ask all parties not to close their eyes to this issue, and at least to be open to examining the feasibility of allowing modulation on a varying basis between different countries and regions. It is very important not to close the door on that.

Mr. Hogg: I was aware that there were those who disagreed with me on that point. I considered the argument when I was the Minister, and the real danger is one of principle. Once one accepts the principle of modulation in one sector, it is difficult so to confine it. That is one of the reasons why I came firmly to the conclusion that it would be wrong to support policies of modulation.

There are three other brief points I wish to make. The Minister must consider milk quotas this year, and I hope that he will robustly resist any proposals to cut unilaterally the United Kingdom's allocation. I hope also that he will press as robustly as he can for inter-state transferability.

On potatoes—not a matter that the right hon. Gentleman will have focused on directly yet—there is a powerful case for a lightweight regime, and I stress the lightness of the weight. If the choice were between a heavyweight regime and no regime, I would prefer no regime, but a lightweight regime is desirable.

Finally, I wish to make a comment on beef in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East. Beef is in over-production, and exceeds consumption by a substantial amount, and that can be addressed partly by policies to encourage consumption. Those should be primarily financed by the industry, but it may be that the EU and Governments have a role to play. However, we must encourage a reduction in production. That will be hard, and certainly must include a reduction in support prices—for example, intervention prices—and policies designed to encourage extensification.

I shall refer briefly to BSE—a subject with which I have a certain grim familiarity. I sympathise with the Minister in his predicament, in that despite all his meetings, telephone calls and consultations, he has no timetable and no bankable assurances and has made no progress. That said, provided he continues to follow the policies that I put in place—which he has been following almost in their totality—he will have my support.

The Minister is right to press ahead with the certified herds scheme. My bet is that the Commission and the Council will propose some form of Northern Irish solution, and I will not criticise him if he takes that offer. He should treat it as but the first step and urgently seek comparable treatment for other parts of the United Kingdom. He is right also to press the case urgently for the exemption of cattle born after 1 August last year, and beef products from those cattle. There is a point on maternal transmission, but suitable safeguards can be incorporated in such a scheme, which I believe is intellectually wholly justified.

The Minister has talked about an EU-wide offal ban or regime and he is following on from our proposals and policies. In December last year, the Commission proposed an EU-wide offal regime. We supported it, but the Council did not. We pressed the Commissioner to come forward with further proposals, and I am glad that he is doing so. I hope, and I am confident, that the Minister will support him.

If such proposals are not passed by the Council, the right hon. Gentleman will be right—I would have done exactly the same—to impose a national ban on imports from those EU countries that do not have an appropriate offal control regime comparable with our own and where there is a reasonable risk that BSE is present either in the national herd or in the beef products being manufactured. That is four square within the policies that we adopted.

The Minister spoke briefly about his view of the Department, and I do not dissent very much from what he said. I always regarded my paramount duty, and that of the Department, as being to the consumer. The overwhelming duties, obligations, interests and concerns of MAFF are the quality of food and food safety. MAFF is not in the pockets of the producer, although it is perfectly true that the interests of the producer and of the manufacturer are important to MAFF. If one must make a choice between them, the consumer comes first. For that reason, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) and I proposed the chief food safety adviser and the Food Safety Council. The Minister has preferred an agency. So be it—one can achieve results in various ways.

I shall make two points about the proposed agency, although we shall consider the detailed proposals when they are produced. First, Ministers must remain accountable for the implementation of policy. Nothing else will be acceptable. Secondly, if the Minister wants the public to be reassured—they need reassurance, although I think much of the uncertainty is unjustified—it is important that the agency or the body giving the assurance is independent, authoritative and remote from the process of implementation. If the body that is monitoring and commenting on food safety is also the body implementing food policy, I fancy that there will be no great reassurance.

I spent a lot of time—although less than I would have liked because of BSE—visiting factories, processors and, of course, farms. I came away enormously impressed with the high quality and safety of British food. I am not for a moment trying to deny that there are improvements that could be made here and there. I know perfectly well that the standards in some abattoirs are not what we would wish—we have been driving them up, but there are further improvements to make. However, to pretend that British food is not of the highest standard is a caricature. Frankly, much of the criticism that I have read and heard, denigrating the quality and safety of British food, is arrant nonsense. We have a right to be proud of the British food industry and I hope that the Minister will take every opportunity to say so.

[Mr. Hogg]

Finally, I must say a brief word about the relations that I hope the ministerial team will have with the farming community, the National Farmers Union, the Country Landowners Association and others. As I said, MAFF's principal duties are to the consumer. If one has to choose, that is where the main obligation lies. None the less, it is important to maintain a close relationship with the farming community, whose interests are important. That community plays a central part in the rural economy and has a lot to teach us in this place. The practical implications of policy are not always immediately apparent to officials or—dare I say it—Ministers. Early discussion and consultation, therefore, are enormously valid.

In that context—I hope the Minister will forgive me for making a less gracious remark—I strongly deprecate the right hon. Gentleman's decision to do away with the regional panels. I found them valuable. They were a good source of advice and information and information gathering will be impoverished by their destruction.

The farming community is worried and troubled. It feels unsafe in Labour's hands—[HON. MEMBERS: "Come on!"] No, the community feels unsafe in Labour's hands for a variety of reasons. First, it sees the Labour party as an urban party. Secondly, it sees the party as being vulnerable to pressure from single-interest groups and I am bound to say that I think the community is right. There are already signs that the countryside will be prejudiced by a Labour Government because of their policy on fox hunting, for example, the policy towards badgers and the position that some hon. Members have on occasion taken on the export of live animals, as well as what has frequently been said on the right to roam.

The farming community is right to be troubled. I do not believe that the future of the countryside and the farming community is safe in Labour hands.

Dr. John Cunningham: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is ruining a perfectly good and credible speech with all this nonsense at the end about farmers and rural communities not feeling safe with Labour. The Conservative party has no representatives in Scotland, which is quite rural, or in Wales, which is pretty rural. I and my colleagues who have represented rural areas for many years have the largest majorities that we have ever had—that is certainly true in my case in 27 years in the House—so he is talking absolute nonsense. Of course, farmers have concerns, some of which are legitimate and some of which are not necessarily as they think, but I must remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman that their concerns are principally a consequence of the failures of the previous Administration. That is what has caused farmers so much trouble—not the advent of a Labour Government, who are well in touch with rural communities and need no lessons from him about how to represent them as we have been doing it effectively for a very long time.

Mr. Hogg: I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman deceives himself. Had the Parliamentary Secretary been able to meet his commitment to attend the Lincolnshire county show yesterday—as I did—where his absence was much noted, he would have heard many of the anxieties that I have expressed today.

I do not intend to end primarily on a discordant note, however. So, if the Minister promotes the interests of the British farming community and of British agriculture, he will receive support from us of a sort that we never received from Labour when we were in government. He needs to remember, however, that the workings of his Ministry are dominated by Europe and that the European agricultural policy is largely driven by national self-interest. It is true that parsnips are not buttered by good words. There is no substitute for a vigorous assertion of the British national interest. I wish the right hon. Gentleman well if he does that and, if needs must, he must be ready to stand alone in the Council.

5.4 pm

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): There could be no more dramatic demonstration of the changes made seven weeks ago than the fact that the Conservative agriculture spokesman in this debate, the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), had only four Conservative Back Benchers sitting behind him. Strikingly, we have also seen only two of the Europhobe guerrillas from the Opposition in the Chamber—the hon. Members for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) and for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), who are both beloved by Labour Members. It is strange for the right hon. and learned Gentleman to remark that Labour is seen as an urban party. He should look at the map after the recent general election.

Agriculture in the United Kingdom has many forces tugging at it, not least climate change, which even the common agricultural policy does not seek to control at this stage. Two of the chief tugging forces are the manipulative power of the CAP and the controlling force exercised by the buying power of the giant supermarket and fast-food chains. The latter have the power to control the margins of primary agricultural and horticultural producers and are extending that power as their smaller competitors are increasingly pushed out of business. Although that is not directly germane to the debate, it demonstrates a pressure on our agriculture industry that will increasingly be felt alongside any changes in the CAP that reduce the prices of agricultural produce.

At the same time, as has been said, European enlargement will present a further challenge as, of course, does the general agreement on tariffs and trade. The CAP cannot continue as it is in the context of enlargement. MAFF estimates the cost of its continuance at £15 billion ecu a year for Poland, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic and Hungary alone; so, revisions to the CAP have to have enlargement very much in mind. The two will be inextricably intertwined.

The CAP was conceived, sensibly—as was British agricultural policy in 1947—to avoid food shortages and the collapse of parts of the industry, but it has metamorphosed over the years to preside over an era of surplus. Farming throughout Europe is now efficient in varying degrees, intensive in varying degrees and stable, with periodic disasters, of course, such as BSE. The EU is effectively self-sufficient in food and certainly in basic foodstuffs, but the CAP has not changed radically, as it should have done, to deal with the removal of its initial purpose. Instead, there has been an increasingly complex system of subsidies and quotas, which seek to second-guess the market and to control the ever increasing efficiency and productivity of our farmers. The

consequences for the taxpayer in the European Union and for the hugely inflated bureaucratic burden placed on farmers have been unacceptable.

The European Union seems to have lost sight of the fact that interventionism and protectionism—both key features of the CAP—are not part of article 39 of the treaty of Rome. The whole tangled system has arisen as a result of ad hoc responses, seeking to hold together vastly different agricultural traditions and communities in the European Union. I do not see how we can sustain much longer a system that seeks to embrace tobacco farmers in Crete, hill sheep farmers in Cumbria and everything in between. It does not make sense.

We have ended up with expensive absurdities in the United Kingdom, such as the dairy regime and set-aside. The dairy quota in the UK has resulted in our not being allowed to produce enough milk to meet our domestic requirements, while other countries are permitted to produce enough to allow them substantial exports.

Britain, because of its geography and its farmers' efficiency, is probably the country best placed to supply all the milk that it needs itself and to export, but the quota system prevents that. Furthermore, the value attached to milk quota makes it almost impossible for new entrants who do not inherit to get into dairy farming at all.

It is hard for any man or woman in the street to understand why a country such as ours, with a huge adverse imbalance of trade in food, pays farmers to set aside good growing land and pays bureaucrats to administer the system. EU agricultural exports can compete on the world market only through a labyrinth of subsidies, all open to fraud, while home markets are protected against imports.

Clearly, the CAP must be reformed drastically, and the quicker the better, but I agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham that the difficulties in getting agreement in the EU on the extent and nature of reform are immense.

One basis for the way forward lies in the impulse behind the Cork declaration and in the underlying strategy behind the Labour party's policy document, "A Working Countryside", which the Parliamentary Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley), played a large part in putting together. I know, from what he and my right hon. Friend the Minister have said, that they are thinking of changing the title and mission statement of their Ministry, to reflect a more realistic emphasis on rural policy and food policy as a whole, rather than on simply the manipulation of production.

The National Farmers Union also addressed that question in "Real Choices", which I consider a seminal document, published about three years ago. At the centre of what we must campaign for should be the reduction and, in most cases, ending of subsidy payments, and an end to centralised supply control.

Agriculture will never be an entirely free market, for the simple reason that no state can entirely relinquish its grip on the environmental consequences of farming or risk its overall food supply in difficult times, but the CAP must be made to end those controls that most distort the market in agricultural produce, and allow farmers to compete openly for their home market and for the European and world markets, which are the biggest of the challenges.

The phasing out of subsidies and quotas would also mean phasing out intervention buying, surpluses and crop destruction or give-away—the symbol for most people of the CAP's malfunctioning. Most British farmers would be well placed to compete in a freer market. The huge budget reductions that should accrue from such a process should, at least in part, go back to rural areas for conservation work, environmental enhancement and economic regeneration of the rural areas—which are now largely represented by Labour Members. The two processes would have to be integrated over a reasonable period, so that farm incomes are not slashed before the new support systems are in place.

Britain has fairly wide experience, although not lavishly funded, of agri-environmental schemes, on which the Select Committee on Agriculture reported earlier this year. I noted in Question Time earlier today that the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe, announced that the Government would respond to that in the near future; I look forward to that.

I hope that the Government will consider the report's recommendations—which were perhaps not as fiercely expressed as I would have liked, but are along the right lines—and consider them as possible pilots for the thrust of a reformed CAP. In particular, I hope that they will consider the recommendation to integrate the schemes into a single, national framework, which would make the monitoring and administration of the system more efficient. I believe that the Welsh Office has already considered the consequences of a Wales-wide scheme, and that might be an efficient way in which to begin—although I leave it to Welsh Members to comment further.

The Select Committee also recommended that farmers should be encouraged to draw up farm conservation plans. That could be happening now, and we need not wait too long for it. I hope, too, that the Government will consider training schemes for farmers and farm workers in environmental management, and ways of assisting new entrants go into farming and horticulture.

Decoupling subsidy from production and freeing up the market must be accompanied by encouragement for farmers to reduce intensification, in turn reducing the use of agrochemicals and grazing intensity in less-favoured areas. There should be incentives for farmers to plant trees in nitrate-sensitive areas, for example. There is a host of suggestions in the report that add up to a way forward for a new CAP.

It will become clear that addressing socio-economic difficulties in less-favoured areas, alongside reduction in support for production, must be undertaken on a regional basis. Most measures will have to be region specific, and could well be in the form of regional development programmes, as suggested in the previous Government's document "European Agriculture: the Case for Radical Reform", which I believe was published last year. That might well fit with the proposals of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for regional development agencies.

We should put much more effort into organic farming. The United Kingdom falls way behind some of our EU partners, as the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) said in Question Time. Organic growers need help with rapid transportation and distribution if organic produce is to seize a proportion of the market. Vegetables, for example,

[Mr. Colin Pickthall]

soon lose their attractiveness alongside mass-produced, rapidly distributed vegetables on supermarket shelves, if they begin to dry out and—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): There has been a disturbance in the Chamber, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I understand that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) is the new leader of the Tory party.

Mr. Pickthall: Well, that is good news—for us.

In the changes that are necessary—not the one of which we have just heard—to reduce the growth of intensive agriculture, there are powerful demands for diversification. It would be preferable for the change of direction to come about through the activities represented by agri-environmental schemes rather than through the growth of the theme-park variety of diversification. Increasing numbers of large housing developments on former agricultural land, golf courses, driving ranges and motor bike scrambling tracks will not lead to environmental improvement or significant rural economic regeneration. Last year's Countryside Commission document on the future role of agri-environment schemes was right when it said:

"while we work for broader CAP reform, we could use agri-environment and other experimental approaches to test out and refine environmental farming systems which could be adopted more widely in the event of such reform."

The farming community in Britain in recent years has shown itself remarkably hostile to the CAP, even those farmers who benefit substantially from subsidies. Hill farmers in the north of England tell me that they could not survive without the brown envelopes, as they put it, but equally they are deeply bothered about having to rely on subsidies for up to 75 per cent. of their income. My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary earlier gave an average figure of £26,000 per sheep farm. That is an extraordinary figure. There is something very odd about hill farmers being paid to run sheep as glorified lawn mowers, keeping the fells trimmed to please the eyes of day trippers.

The NFU's document "Real Choices" and the general attitude of British farmers convince me that there has never been a better time for a British Government to work with people in agriculture to present a powerful case in Europe for reform. Add to that the fact that we now have a Government who are prepared to try to build, rather than ruin, alliances in Europe to achieve sensible, radical reform, and I hope, and anticipate, that the early years of the new century will see a more rational, less expensive and more environmentally friendly agriculture system that takes advantage of world markets on a more equal footing.

Ministers have a huge responsibility, and a huge opportunity, in that endeavour. I believe that they carry the good will of a large majority of the British people, including farmers. They will confront conflicting sectional interests in the industry, and the huge regional and national self-interest of the countries of the European Union, but the logic of what they are about is relentless and inescapable. The CAP is out of date, costly and wasteful. There is a broad consensus on that across the House and, I think, throughout the country. My right hon. Friend's start is welcome. I wish Ministers well in seeing it through to a satisfactory conclusion.

5.22 pm

Mrs. Caroline A. Spelman (Meriden): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I thank the House in advance for listening, given the foreshortened length of the debate. The House will appreciate that I pay tribute to my predecessor, Iain Mills, with a note of sadness. He was much respected in Meriden as a good constituency Member. He worked hard for those in need, especially in Chelmsley Wood in the north of the constituency, where he helped to secure a local Benefits Agency office. The sad circumstances of Iain's death must be a challenge to us all not to let a colleague down and to try harder to help colleagues facing problems or ill health. The House will want to reassure his widow that Iain's tragedy will strengthen our resolve to care for each other in the years ahead.

I wanted to speak in the debate on agriculture because of the acute pressures on the countryside in my constituency, especially the Meriden gap, a narrow corridor of green belt only six miles wide at its narrowest point between Coventry and Birmingham. As a newcomer to the area, selected only 11 weeks before the general election, I was struck by the fragile character of this rural area. Meriden, as the name implies, lies at the very centre of England and boasts excellent communications. With Birmingham international airport, the west coast main line and the midlands motorway network passing through, one can reach London, Bristol, Manchester, Paris or Amsterdam in an hour and a half—except on a bad day, in which case one would be jolly lucky to get to Wolverhampton in that time.

Meriden has conceded some of its best countryside to the prestigious national exhibition centre, a beneficiary of those good communications. That illustrates the willingness of my constituents to move with the times and be well connected, to welcome the facilities of modern business and transportation. However, that comes at a price. One can still find idyllic green country lanes in the villages of Barston, Berkswell and Hampton in Arden, but rising over the brow of the hill one is soon reminded of the proximity of the cities by the sound of traffic and the glow of lights.

What happens to the Meriden countryside will depend on the future shape of the common agricultural policy. The beef crisis has placed an exceptional strain on small family farms devoted to dairy and beef farming. Uncertainty has probably been the greatest strain. As we have heard that the incidence of BSE has fallen from 1,000 cases a week to 100 and that there is a prospect of eradicating the disease by 2001, a timetable for lifting the ban must now be possible. Meriden's small farms are small by British standards, but they are far from small in European terms. It is the Meriden-sized farms that may fall through the gap between very small farms, which are supported to prevent the desertification of the countryside as in rural Greece or Portugal, and the large farms typical of the Beauce in the Paris basin, which could probably survive with no support at all. I hope that the Minister agrees that any move towards modulation would be counter-productive to efforts to reform the CAP into a more market-oriented policy. It would disadvantage British farmers and could result in Meriden's farms going under concrete for ever.

Meriden's farmers will also struggle to compete if the support system for the CAP is not overhauled before the enlargement of the European Union. Anyone who has

visited the vast collectivised farms of eastern Europe will realise the competitive advantage that they would enjoy, with their economies of scale and low wage costs. Unless the CAP is reformed into its separate economic and social aspects, it will collapse under the strain of supporting huge east European farms with unrealistic subsidies. I urge the new Government to fight hard to prevent British farmers from being disadvantaged by CAP reform and to watch out for the national aids that are often used by European countries to offset the impact of reform but distort agricultural markets.

Only a small percentage of my constituents are farmers, but the land that they tend, and the environment that it offers, is what attracts many more people to quit the city and raise their families in a relatively healthy, safe and harmonious environment. Those who choose to live in the leafy suburbs of Knowle and Dorridge have weighed up the benefits of dwelling poised between town and country. All too often, I am shown new developments where once stood bluebell woods and open fields. Residents are right to protest at the loss of the rural amenity for which they originally moved to the area. This is where the values of middle England are nurtured: honesty, fairness and mutual respect. To undermine this fragile framework, in which young people are brought up and the elderly retire with security and pleasure, would be a step backwards from the rural legacy that made England a green and pleasant land.

5.29 pm

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): I congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on a nice speech. I also take the opportunity to congratulate my near neighbour, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), who has something to be congratulated on this evening. I am sure that he would have been here this evening to hear what I have to say about the rural constituency of Scarborough and Whitby had circumstances been different. As the new Member of Parliament for Scarborough and Whitby, I am grateful for the opportunity to make this maiden speech on a subject which I know is of key importance to the fine people who live and work on the land in the glorious and popular part of North Yorkshire which I am proud to represent.

Scarborough and Whitby constituency is blessed by a dramatic coast of magnificent cliffs, with miles and miles of beautiful beaches stretching from just north of Filey, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), for 45 miles to Staithes, which is also known as the Yorkshire Polperro. The classic British family seaside holiday was invented in my constituency. I am glad to say that most hon. Members and their families have experienced and valued the hospitality and welcome of the people whom I come to the House to serve. I am not making an early application for the job of director of tourism by making that statement.

As well as the temptations of the shoreline, I commend the spectacular countryside of North Yorkshire national park, which is maintained in trust for an appreciative nation by some of the most hard-working farm workers one will find anywhere in the country. It will be far from a surprise to hon. Members if I urge those who have not had the pleasure of visiting my constituency to go for a stroll along Baxtergate in Whitby, or Aberdeen walk in Scarborough, or to take a touring holiday in the beautiful Esk valley, or to go to Robin Hood's bay. The choices are countless, and the attractions are something to be seen. They are real British gems. So I ask all hon. Members to appreciate the qualities of my constituency, if not of this speech.

Hon. Members who visit my constituents will be assured of a welcome every time, and their friends and families will be welcome time and again—the more times the merrier. After the hospitality industry and the growing light industrial sectors in Eastfield, Scarborough and Whitby, agriculture and fisheries are by far the main basis for economic activity in my beautiful part of the world.

My constituency is the 50th largest in England by area, but it is sparsely populated and we do not have the effective communications of which the hon. Member for Meriden spoke. We have about one third of the density of population of the rest of England. That is important to remember.

I have the honour to be the first Labour Member of Parliament to represent my part of the world. The constituency was previously known simply as Scarborough. This part of Yorkshire has time and again returned Conservative Members. I have looked back in the history books and found that there was a great political landslide in the early part of this century which saw the return of a Liberal Member for the borough of Scarborough.

As my hon. Friends probably know, I am a civil engineer. It was my job before I came here to prevent landslides. This is the first time that my professional colleagues have congratulated me on causing one. The famous Holbeck Hall hotel ended up in the sea. The local press suggested—

Mr. Pickthall: My hon. Friend failed to prevent that landslide.

Mr. Quinn: It was not my job. I was a railway civil engineer. I had to stand in front of the site of the Holbeck Hall disaster on the day after my election and point at the landslide. It was an awful pun, but I thank *Scarborough Evening News* for its contribution to this maiden speech.

The boundary changes of 1983 saw the restoration of Whitby and the Moors to the former parliamentary seat of the same name. Until 1974, Whitby was included in Cleveland, a seat which was later abolished as a result of the creation of the county of Cleveland. Yorkshire ceded a little bit of Yorkshire to the county of Cleveland. I regret that the previous Government redefined the boundaries of Cleveland. As a consequence of the 1995 boundary review, recommendations were made to change the name again to Scarborough and Whitby. I commend not only the local people from Whitby who insisted on the change of name but the many members of my constituency party who felt that it was important that Whitby was recognised in the name of the seat, and who made representations to that effect.

One speaks to many people on arriving in Parliament, and many people have spoken to me about the previous Member for the seat that I have the pleasure to serve. John Sykes is fondly remembered as a kind and caring Member of Parliament who was held in high regard for his abilities as a pianist, and for his sociability. He is also well known and respected in the constituency for his great work with charities. Although John and I could rarely find a common

[Mr. Quinn]

point in terms of political analysis, and rarely did we agree in any debate, John was always courteous to me, my family and friends.

I had a great surprise last Christmas when I received both a birthday card and a Christmas card from John and his family. They were different in tone and content from all the previous letters that I had received from him, and it was good to receive such a thoughtful card just before Christmas day, my birthday. I had to check with John that the card was from him. It was, and that is the sort of chap he is.

Following my success on 1 May, I was delighted to receive many letters of congratulation and support from many local people in my constituency. I should like to acknowledge now and put on record the high regard in which John Sykes's predecessor, Sir Michael Shaw, was held in the constituency. He was a remarkable Member of Parliament, who served our community for more than 26 years. People involved in politics in Scarborough and Whitby regarded him as a hard-working and commendable Member of Parliament. It would have been remiss of me not to place on record the high regard in which he is held in my part of North Yorkshire.

Sir Michael established a welcome tradition for me to take up on my entry into Parliament. I believe that it was he who set up the tradition of entertaining the Scarborough civic party in the House before its visit to Buckingham palace garden party. I am pleased to say that John Sykes maintained the tradition and that I shall have great pleasure in entertaining the civic party in the House when it comes down to London in July.

The past few weeks have been a tremendous historical chapter in the glorious history of the constituency that I serve. We had the Synod of Whitby in 665 at the famous abbey of Whitby. Caedmon, the first English poet, lived in Whitby until 680. The ancient rivalries between the Saxons and the Vikings, who set up the fishing community in Scarborough in the 10th century, are remembered in stories told time and again in local pubs and clubs in Scarborough and Whitby. It is a great tradition of history. Scarborough spa was established in the 17th century, which made Scarborough the first English seaside resort. That is something that we regard with great pride in my part of the world.

Scarborough and Whitby have contributed greatly to our nation's history and without a doubt are regarded highly internationally. Possibly the most notable episode in our history is that of Captain Cook. His connection with the people of Whitby is regarded with great fondness. Only recently the replica of the Endeavour returned to Whitby. We had 10 wonderful days in Whitby when more than 1.2 million people visited the small Yorkshire town. They came in their droves and felt the welcome and warmth of the people of Whitby and of my constituency.

It was remarkable that that happened in May 1997. It was pure magic for all those days in the streets of Whitby.

The constituency and the community are now focused entirely on the project of rebuilding Captain Cook's Resolution, the largest ship to sail to Australia in the 18th century. That Resolution project will mark the start of the third millennium for my constituency. I hope that it will give jobs and skills to my constituents, as well as their providing the best fish and chips in Britain, the legend of Dracula and the famous Whitby welcome. I know that most of my constituents are keen to see the Endeavour return from her trip around Britain. I hope that she will return this autumn to be refitted in the port. The crew will then receive the hospitality of the port, before Endeavour commences her dangerous voyage over the Atlantic to Boston.

Hon. Members may think that that is more than enough to happen to a small place such as Whitby and a constituency such as Scarborough and Whitby, but there was more. In May, the Whitby Town footballers from the Northern league, who have become local legends, won the Football Association vase at Wembley; they have also become the champions of the Northern league. It was quite a month for Whitby and for the "Seasiders"—and, of course, I make no reference to the general election result in any of this.

The House will doubtless appreciate why I believe that there is a great sense of hope and optimism among my constituents. When I walk down streets such as Flowergate in Whitby and Huntriss row in Scarborough, which happen to be where the Conservative association clubs are located, I see people walking round with what local journalists call "coat-hanger smiles". They are happier than they have been in a long time—doubtless owing to the return of the Endeavour and Whitby's great victory in football.

My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's announcement yesterday on quota hoppers has been regarded with true Whitby and Yorkshire grit as a good start. In reality, that is the best we are going to get at the moment. But I commend to my right hon. Friend the idea of consultation on the fishing industry and its future, particularly in the ports that I represent—that would be very welcome. Those in the fishing industry want my right hon. Friend and his Front-Bench colleagues to listen to their problems. They feel that they have been forgotten, which is why it is important that we make a new start under this new Government.

I was advised that, when I made my maiden speech, I should try not to be controversial, and I hope that what I am about to say will not be regarded as such. I had an opportunity to reflect on my predecessor's maiden speech, in which he unfortunately described the fishing community in Scarborough and Whitby as

"my floating voters, but not in the democratic sense."—[*Official Report*, 8 June 1992; Vol. 209, c. 89.]

That was a fundamental error on his part: any voter should be listened to, and it is the responsibility of every Member of the House to speak up as effectively as possible on behalf of all his constituents.

I am receiving puzzled looks from Opposition Members, who seem to be wondering when I will address the substantive point of the debate. I am here to contribute to the debate on the common agricultural policy, which is an important issue for my constituents and for farming interests in my constituency. They know that I do not come from a background of working the land. However, members of the local branch of the National Farmers Union know me, and know that I have a long and fruitful record of helping some of them, particularly when in my previous occupation. I was previously a railway civil engineer, an occupation which found me occasionally working with farmers.

I was regularly in contact with many landowners whose crops or stock had been damaged or killed owing to the alleged failure of railway fencing to keep out "railway rabbits" and badgers from the best crops of wheat, beet or other vegetables due for market. *[Interruption.]* I am receiving some acknowledgement from Opposition Members, who presumably recognise the truth of what I am saying.

The fences are there to keep the stock off the operational railway, not to keep the pests off the land. It has always amazed me that "railway rabbits", so called by the victims of the trespass, cannot be persuaded to wear the appropriate safety clothing. If they were railway rabbits, they would be wearing high-visibility orange vests.

Throughout my political career, I have attempted to use my perspective as an engineer. At Question Time, there was an exchange between my hon. Friends. Civil engineers rarely become Members of Parliament; the record shows that there are more lawyers than engineers in Parliament. But I bring with me my professional and personal code, which has always demanded that I solve problems, not cause them. I hope that my colleagues in the Whips Office agree that that sentiment merits consideration from all hon. Members.

In my constituency, as in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), many hill farmers struggle in dangerous and hostile environments to earn what, in many urban areas, would not be regarded as a fair living wage. There is strong evidence that the solitude of farmers and the continuing BSE crisis, which is affecting North Yorkshire's beef and dairy herds, is bringing many other pressures to rural communities and families.

Those increased pressures have led to greater levels of personal stress and greater social problems within individual families. I am sorry to say that there is evidence of more mental health problems among the farming community, which have, sadly, led to an increased suicide rate in that community. In my role as a Member of Parliament, I shall do as much as I can to mitigate the pressures on the rural and farming communities.

I accept that I am a beginner in terms of agriculture, which is not really my subject, but I am here to learn and to participate in the debate. My preparations for this maiden speech will serve me in good stead in my role as representative of the rural community in my constituency. I am confident that, with the help of farmers, farmers' families and other agricultural workers in my constituency, I shall form a deeper appreciation of the key problems affecting such an important economic activity in my constituency.

My right hon. Friend should give serious consideration to opening up the debate on the CAP as he did with fishing quotas. There is demand in the rural communities that I represent for my right hon. Friend to think carefully before accelerating towards enlargement of the Community or the CAP. There are doubtless significant agricultural problems in countries such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Romania. Before we start to expand the CAP in that direction, we must set about some benchmarking—an engineering term—for British agriculture.

Engineers have traditionally been concerned about not throwing out the baby with the bath water. My constituents—in their roles as arable, dairy, beef, pig, poultry and hill farmers—and I are hopeful that, before the debate moves too far towards the east, we should look carefully at an open and fair audit of our national production. We must consider such an audit before we can achieve the much-needed reform of the CAP.

The CAP needs to be more efficient, to save money and to tackle the fraud that is so obvious in many of our partner countries. We need to bring about a real improvement to support our rural economy, and to protect and enhance our environment. For the benefit of my constituents, we must deal with those matters so that we can get on with making important social, educational and transport infrastructure improvements. We need to focus resources on key areas to help pensioners and others in my constituency, who are queueing up with high expectations of our Government.

I commend the proposals for a food standards agency, which will go a long way towards protecting elderly pensioners in particular from the risk of terrible illnesses such as E. coli. The proposals are in the best interests of my constituents, and of both producers and consumers throughout the country.

I support the motion on which we shall be voting, and I thank hon. Members for listening to my speech.

5.50 pm

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): It is always a pleasant task to follow and congratulate a maiden speaker. On this occasion, I find myself following and congratulating two successive maiden speakers. The hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) spoke with particular sensitivity about her late predecessor. I was never close to Iain either geographically or politically, but on one occasion we pursued a mutual constituency interest together and I can pay tribute to the good humour and friendliness, as well as the characteristic tenacity, with which he pursued it. We were all saddened by the circumstances that attended the end of his life, but the sensitivity of the hon. Lady's speech will find a warm echo here during the current Parliament, and I wish her well.

Then there was the landslide expert, the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn). We all remember that hotel falling into the sea with particular affection—although I appreciate that it must have been a hot potato locally, and very distressing for those who were directly affected. I recall the celebrated—or, rather, unforgettable—occasion when the pound fell out of the exchange rate mechanism and the House was recalled for an emergency debate. Those of us who were present on that occasion were privileged to hear a legendary performance by the late John Smith, in which he built up a crescendo of attack against the beleaguered Government of the time, pointing out that not only had we fallen out of the ERM but the Grand National no longer started and hotels had begun falling into the sea.

We shall watch and pursue that constituency issue with great interest in the period ahead—and what an interesting period it will be, in the light of events in the past 50 minutes or so outside the Chamber in the parliamentary Conservative party. It is a reflection of the difficulty that the Conservatives are in with their countryside policy generally that they felt the need to distract attention from the debate by laying on such a memorable show to coincide with the farewell

[Mr. Charles Kennedy]

performance of the former Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I assume that he still holds his shadow Cabinet post, unless he is the first to have been sacked.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): He has been culled.

Mr. Kennedy: My hon. Friend may be right. Given the extraordinary result that has just taken place in the parliamentary Tory party, its members—having experienced a non-selective cull on 1 May—may well be heading politically for a policy approach of set-aside for themselves. We shall be more than willing to assist them in that direction.

Four fifths of the speech of the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), the former Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, was interesting and constructive. He made some telling observations based on his experience. Like the former Prime Minister, who has just ceased to be leader of the Conservative party, former Conservative Cabinet Ministers always sound much better in defeat than they ever did when they were on top. Let me say one thing to the right hon. and learned Gentleman by way of generosity, as the Liberal Democrats do not feel sufficiently generous to subscribe to the nonsense that has been tabled in the name of the Conservative party.

The Conservatives have had a bad night and a bad experience—I refer to 1 May, not to what has just happened. We should note not just the numbers but the complexion of the current parliamentary Conservative party, whose members have been beaten back to their rural shire strongholds—although many of those are hanging by pretty shoogly nails. Perhaps, despite the disastrous result—given the kind of seats that the Conservatives managed to cling on to—the former Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was doing a little more right than he was given credit for, certainly by his own party, in the run-up to the general election.

This first agriculture debate in the new Parliament is significant. I need only look around me to see that the Liberal Democrats who are present more than outgun the Conservatives in terms of numbers. If the Conservatives carry on as they have been doing, they will not recover credibility in regard to such matters as agriculture, fisheries and rural policy generally. I am thinking not only of the amendment that they have tabled today, but of the response from the Dispatch Box following the statement on quota hopping yesterday. As someone put it rather brilliantly during Agriculture questions this afternoon, they keep wanting to shield themselves behind the self-evident shortcomings of their own Administration, who were in office only six or seven weeks ago.

There is an equally interesting facet of the current Parliament. We should consider not just the number of Liberal Democrats who have been returned, but the geography and demography of the seats represented by many of my 46 colleagues. We are now in a prime position to provide constructive, responsible, effective and credible opposition, in the best sense of the word—proper parliamentary and political opposition—to MAFF, perhaps finding it easier than the Conservatives will. That will be a major concern for my colleagues and me in the weeks and months ahead.

I congratulate—it would be churlish to do otherwise—not just the new ministerial team on their appointments, but the new Minister on the more constructive approach that he immediately initiated with Europe. That is clearly in all our interests. The Minister is operating within a Government who will not be a riven as their predecessor on matters European generally. He was also right to make it an early priority to talk to Mr. Fischler, establishing a rapport with his opposite numbers in the other Agriculture Ministries, talking to the incumbent Presidents and preparing, even at this stage, for the UK presidency which will happen in the first half of next year. All that is welcome.

I thank the Minister for his courtesy in the discussions about the immediate pressing BSE crisis, which has affected the whole beef sector. My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler)—whom I succeed as agriculture spokesman, although I am glad that we shall continue to benefit from the broad range of experience and credibility that he brought to the task—has already led a group of colleagues to meet the Parliamentary Secretary for some initial discussions, from the perspective of the south-west of England in particular. We were encouraged by some of the initial exchanges that we had today about the progress that could be achieved, which the Minister thinks is worth exploring. He confirmed that to me in an oral answer this afternoon, which he had been discussing with Sir David Naish of the NFU and others. We shall want to follow that up as a group, and to remain in close touch with the Government. There is no doubt that the position that they have inherited remains desperate from the point of the beef sector generally.

The beef sector has been visited by devastation, the like of which has not been seen for many years, and further constructive and sustained action must be taken to try to get the beef ban lifted. Although beef consumption has risen to above last year's level in the first quarter of this year, there is still understandable desperation in the beef sector. It is clear that that will go on through the summer and into the autumn, not least because suckler cows and calves will be coming to market.

The Government are correct in responding to the crisis that they have inherited by making sure that imports of beef meet the standards that are applied in this country. Anyone who has had dealings with the agricultural community in any part of the country will know that that unfairness added insult to huge injury. In advance of the 22 July meeting of the Agriculture Council, the House should send a constructive signal to Brussels that we shall give a fair wind to orders or instruments that may need to be tabled if there is not an adequate response from fellow EU member states.

Equally important is the need for a computerised central cattle database, which should be introduced as quickly as is feasible. Perhaps in his reply to the debate the Minister will outline the Department's thinking on the time scale that may be involved in that. Those of us who recently fought agricultural or rural seats have been honest with our farming representatives in saying that securing the overall lifting of the beef ban will not be easy nor was it ever likely to happen early or in one fell swoop.

People in agriculture must understand that they have voices and supporters in the House across the political spectrum. They should know that we shall do all that we can not just at Whitehall and UK levels but in Brussels

where we hope to lobby the Commission. We shall also work with our colleagues in the European Parliament to maintain the greatest possible momentum to ensure that the logjam is broken. I hope that that happens sooner rather than later. We must not create false expectations or set artificial deadlines of the kind that were set early last year. I shall never forget listening to the Prime Minister when he returned from the summit saying that the ban would be lifted by November. In the Chamber, we heard the unmistakeable sound of the clock striking 13. Farmers have had more than enough of that kind of approach and a change is needed.

Other hon. Members, including one of my hon. Friends, wish to take part in the debate and make their maiden speeches, so I shall not overstay my welcome. However, I should like to comment on the broader issue of CAP reform, which underpins the papers for the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) was right when he said in an intervention on the Minister that Amsterdam was a bit of a disappointment in the context of the important political objective of EU enlargement. As that enlargement must be accompanied by inevitable reform of the CAP, let us hope that the lack of progress on the policy imperative of enlargement does not lead to sluggishness in discussions on reform of the CAP. Enlargement and reform must be in step, and slow discussions would be a great setback for our agricultural interests.

I tend to agree with the Minister that the CAP must move closer to the marketplace. That is a sane policy, not least because of our international trade obligations and the markets in which we seek to sell. That means a move away from supply control and the present system of subsidy payments. As the Cork declaration made clear some time ago, the Commission recognises that CAP reform is at the top of the European agenda and that it must take into account the wider concerns of environmental sustainability and rural diversification.

If we head towards more and more conglomerates at the expense of the family farm, we shall be on a policy line that is completely counter-productive to the broader policies that we want to achieve for the sustainability of the rural economy and the role of the family farm in underpinning that. That applies particularly to areas such as Wales. I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) nods. Following the Cork declaration, it is important to try to move Europe in the direction of sustainable agriculture that will be able to compete in world markets while at the same time sustaining the environment and rural economies.

There will be opportunities later this year to look at the British presidency in the first half of next year. Some measures ought to be pursued and at this early stage the Minister has outlined one or two of them. I hope that we shall be extremely proactive in using the lucky coincidence of our presidency next year to ensure that those matters are on the agenda and in making sure that it is relevant to our agriculture. CAP reform is the most obvious issue, but there will also be opportunities to debate fishing.

The co-operation that has developed in this country between agriculture and environmentalists of one type or another is a good way forward for Europe. When I entered the House in 1983, environmental and agricultural interests were at each other's throats: the dialogue was conducted from two trenches. Nowadays groups such as the Crofters Commission in my part of the country, the National Farmers Union and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds have formed joint working parties and published joint documents. That is a great step in terms of general thinking and approach, and anything that the Government can do to foster that productive atmosphere among our European neighbours as well will be good for getting coherent and sensible reform of agricultural policy as a whole. I hope that they will use their presidency to proceed in that way.

The Minister spoke about incomes, which fell significantly last year. As the Minister said, it seems that this year will be bad. Green pound revaluations have obviously extracted their price from all sectors of farming, which have suffered significantly. Of course, the Government could pay about £706 million as a result of the changes over the next three years or so, and half of that amount would come from the European Union. I accept that it is early days, but so far Britain has not made a claim on those sums. No doubt No. 11 Downing street will have much to say about the issue in the context of the Government's overall spending review. However, given the scale of the difficulties, if half that sum is available, the Department should move to claim it if that is felt appropriate.

My second point on incomes relates not just to farmers but to farm workers. The Government intend to set up a low pay commission. I hope that in the course of examining issues such as a minimum wage the Government will take on board the concerns of farm workers, not least because there are still agricultural wages boards. It would be ironic if, when the Government are moving in this direction, they did not at least take account of the evidence and arguments from the wages boards that remained untouched throughout the Thatcherite era. I hope that the Government will not lose sight of that when they consider incomes relative to farming as a whole.

I hope that, on a UK basis—and I do mean by that Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland as well as the different parts of England—the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will consult all the component parts on these extremely complex issues. I hope also—I return to what I said at the outset about myself and my hon. Friends—that, as we see a displacement in our population, with more people moving out of urban Britain and into rural Britain, and with many difficulties in terms of attitudes perhaps being transplanted from one part of Britain to another, which do not always sit very easily or diplomatically with some of the more instinctive attitudes of rural Britain, my hon. Friends and I can constructively give effective voice to the attitudes of rural areas, and ensure that they are not just drowned out by the Labour party, which may be more rurally oriented, but which, inevitably, when one considers its complete membership in the House of Commons, is urban-dominated.

Those voices and communities need to be heard. I think that our friends to the right, the Conservative Members, particularly after tonight's decision, may not be giving effective voice to anything much for the foreseeable future. Therefore, the Liberal Democrats have a positive role to play in this Parliament in the next few years.

6.10 pm

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke–on–Trent, South): I say to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), who made an interesting speech, that I have not a single farm in my constituency. It is

[Mr. George Stevenson]

completely urban. Many of my constituents say to me, "Given the make-up of your constituency, why are you interested in agricultural affairs?" My answer is simple: "I have a funny lot of constituents: they like to eat and they like to drink milk and other agricultural products." The present iniquitous system, which has been with us for far too long, means that my constituents pay through the nose, week in, week out, through taxes, subsidies and food prices, to support that system. The time is long overdue for a radical and fundamental reform of the system. I hope that that has given some consolation to the hon. Gentleman.

I want to direct my remarks mainly to CAP reform. The speech of the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), the shadow spokesman, was remarkable. As I listened to his positive speech, I could not help but think, as I am sure other hon. Members did: why, in all the time that there was a Conservative Government, were hardly any of the things that he referred to enacted? Although I felt that his speech had more than a touch of the lecture about it, it was a positive lecture and, in that sense, it is welcome.

It worried me when I heard the shadow spokesman say that one of the first things that my hon. Friends on the Front Bench will find when they attend the Agriculture Council is that none of the other Council members knows anything about agriculture. That is dangerous, and I am sure that my hon. Friends will not need reminding that the last thing that they should do is to go into that Council meeting with the attitude that no one else knows what they are talking about. I fear that that Freudian slip—if it was a Freudian slip—reflects starkly the reasons why we have such a crisis in agriculture today. For 18 years, Conservative Members have gone into those meetings as if they were the only ones who knew what they were talking about and everyone else did not. The shadow spokesman's remark clearly illustrates why we have the problems that we face today.

Nevertheless, the prospects for the CAP reforms that we want are probably better now than they have been for two decades. There were good prospects for fundamental reform in 1984, but the Government failed. There were similar prospects in 1988, but the Government failed. There were similar prospects in 1992 and, although the Government came back and trumpeted the 1992 reforms as fundamental, we all know that they were nothing of the sort.

In a speech to the House on the 1992 MacSharry reforms, the then Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), said a couple of interesting things. One was that the taxpayer and the consumer would save £8 billion in three years as a result of the reforms. It is interesting to note that, since he made that statement, the CAP budget has increased by more than 30 per cent.—so much for the taxpayer and the consumer benefiting from the reforms. We should never again make promises that we know cannot be achieved.

In the same speech in 1992, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal said that, although there were no changes in the milk regime or in the quota, under the package, there was no reason why all milk quotas should not disappear in three years. It is now 1997 and the prospects for quotas disappearing are probably as remote today as they ever were, so there are important lessons for us and for Ministers to learn in terms of agriculture reform.

I said earlier that the prospects for fundamental CAP reform are probably better now than they have been for some time. I hope that I am not accused of wishful thinking. Some of the factors that will inevitably lead to that reform have already been mentioned, but they are worth repeating. Enlargement is one. Everyone I talk to is in favour of it. Even most EU member states are in favour of it, but how can there be enlargement without fundamental CAP reform? It is simply impossible.

The notion that countries that want to be EU members and whose prices are probably well below those attainable within the CAP will not want to have the full benefits of the policy, with the horrendous budgetary consequences, is nonsense. The World Trade Organisation has also been mentioned. Pressures there will inevitably mean that reform will take place.

I am under some pressure from the Whips to end my speech, but I want to make just two more quick points. First, public opinion will not tolerate any more prevarication on fundamental CAP reform. The CAP may have gone down the political agenda somewhat over the past few years and been overtaken by economic and monetary union, but I know that my hon. Friends on the Front Bench will change that.

Secondly, we now have a clear and positive agenda for change. Among other things, that agenda includes the notion that, if we are to make changes in the CAP that are relevant to the communities that depend on agriculture for their well-being, we have to insist, if we can, that subsidiarity is part of CAP reform.

I am delighted to welcome and to support the motion. At long last, we have a Government who not only have the agenda and the policies, but are determined positively, with the co-operation and support of the other EU member states, to make fundamental CAP reform a reality.

6.19 pm

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I preface my remarks by declaring an interest in the meat and livestock industry.

I congratulate the two new Members who made their maiden speeches today. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) will long be remembered for his reference to landslides. It is the sort of thing that tends to be remembered. Indeed, he made an engaging speech—as did my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), a fellow west midlander. She spoke well of her constituency and, as the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) said, she spoke sensitively about her predecessor. I well remember speaking in the Meriden constituency a few years ago and the thrill that I felt to be in the centre of England on St. George's day.

I congratulate the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), on joining the agriculture Front-Bench team. I appreciate that it must be difficult for someone who represents an urban area to learn, at the speed necessary, about the intricacies and complications of agriculture and its ancillary industries. However, I was impressed to note that he has already taken the bull by the horns—to use an agricultural metaphor—and applied a typical west midlands commonsense approach to the problems facing him.

I thank the Minister of State for receiving a deputation yesterday from the meat industry, representing wholesalers, abattoir owners, retailers, catering butchers and all other sections of the industry. We put our case to him and I thank him for the courtesy with which we were received and for the patience and understanding with which he listened to what we had to say. I very much hope that the spirit of co-operation and willingness to help will be a feature of the new Government.

Obviously and inevitably, there will be differences of opinion between the Opposition and the Government from time to time, but I hope that those criticisms will be constructive and helpful. At the end of the day, many of us realise that we cannot help our industry if we engage in the sort of adversarial exchanges across the Floor which, in the past, have been so very damaging to the meat and livestock and the agriculture industries.

If Members of Parliament insist on standing up in the Chamber and saying that beef is not safe—or that apples or whatever are not safe—that has an enormously damaging effect, out of all proportion to the words used. It is a well-known saying that if one wants to keep a secret, one speaks about it in the House. However, that does not always apply, because often the matters that we would rather did not get out have a tendency to do just that. Too often, hon. Members have made irresponsible remarks about British food, which have hit the headlines and caused untold damage to both consumer confidence and the industry.

There is a great willingness to co-operate, as far as is possible, in the interests of the industry and also—I want to emphasise this point—in the interests of the consumer. Without a satisfied consumer who is confident when buying a British agricultural product, there will be no prosperity in British agriculture.

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said that the Government would insist on the highest standards, and I am sure that we all applaud that commitment. However, in this modern age, so many of the pressures to improve standards and quality come not from legislation, but as a consequence of commercial pressures, applied to all sectors of the industry, to ratchet up standards. For example, in the relationship between a supplier and a major retailer, it is the retailer that drives up standards—not any legislation.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Does my hon. Friend accept that it is all very well for the United Kingdom to drive up standards, but it would be disgraceful if meat were imported from third-world countries, which do not have the same standards, merely because it was cheaper?

Mr. Gill: I agree with my hon. Friend; it is a matter of great concern. I do not share the Government's optimism that they can solve the problem simply by checking the documentation, because we would then run into the whole area of fraud, as so much of the imported product is not what it is purported to be. Apparently, there is no effective way of policing that. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important point.

Parliament tends to be reactive. A problem arises and the Government, of whatever political persuasion, react and try to accommodate public opinion. However, trade, industry and commerce operate differently. Instead of being reactive, they are proactive. I stress again that so much of the improvement in standards in food and the output of the agriculture industry has been because of the commercial pressures applied on the industry, rather than because of legislation.

In future, there must be a presumption in favour of education, both within the industry and of the people who eat the industry's products. There will be a much better overall result if, instead of legislating for every eventuality, we take a more sensible approach and realise that a huge education job needs to be done, involving every one of us. If we have to legislate, we must be careful to ensure that the rules that we try to enforce are both practicable and achievable.

The Minister said that the need to reform the CAP is staring us in the face. I do not think that anyone in the Chamber would disagree. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) drew attention to the frustrations that the new Government will face. We all support their enthusiasm to get matters right and we admire their aspirations and their determination to get results—but they should not be under any illusions about the difficulty of achieving the targets they set themselves in the forum of the European Community. It is much more difficult to get changes to legislation in the forum of Europe than it is in the forum of this Parliament. We wish them well, but they should not approach the matter wearing rose-tinted spectacles. Very soon, they will realise that the practical difficulties faced by the Conservative Government are the same practical difficulties that they will face.

On the issue of the beef ban, I welcome the Government's commitment to table four orders relating to the import of beef and beef products. The Opposition will be anxious to hold the Government to their commitment if they do not get the undertakings that they expect from the EU on 22 July. The lifting of the export ban is vital.

I want to mention another ban that seriously affects British beef and beef products, that is, the ban imposed by local authorities throughout the country on the use of British beef and beef products in school meals and other catering services. I very much hope that Ministers in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, in conjunction with their counterparts in the Department of Health, will bring every possible pressure to bear on local authorities, to persuade them that British beef and British beef products are perfectly safe and should be restored to school menus.

There has been some talk of over-production, but over-production can so easily be explained. Production is stimulated by subsidy to a greater or lesser extent. There will be, for example, a given number of sheep on a given number of farms and hillsides—probably more sheep than those hillsides and farms can sustain—because of the attractions of subsidies. I do not have sufficient time to give other examples of how subsidies stimulate production. Nevertheless, we are able to stimulate consumption only by price, because consumption is very sensitive to price. We should be attempting to reduce the cost of production, so that products are consumed rather than stored or disposed of in other ways. Consumption is the key to many agricultural problems—not least of which are the problems in the beef sector. If we can stimulate demand, we shall go a long way towards solving those problems.

[Mr. Gill]

Earlier today, the Parliamentary Secretary said that he was in favour of supporting organic farming. By the same token, I argue that the Government should be doing whatever they can to stimulate demand. In the longer run, such a strategy will be cheaper than supporting production that must be put into cold store or elsewhere. Such a strategy will be more beneficial for the industry and for the British public and consumers.

6.31 pm

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you for allowing me—as another hon. Member representing a largely urban constituency—to make my maiden speech in today's debate. Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson), however, I have one farm in my constituency. I know that the issues of the quality of the food that we eat and of the countryside are of great interest to my constituents.

I pay tribute to the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches in this debate—the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn). I take issue with my hon. Friend, however, because my constituency of Brighton, Pavilion—not his constituency of Scarborough and Whitby, as he claimed—invented the English seaside holiday.

I have the honour of being the first Labour Member for Brighton, Pavilion. It is also appropriate that I am a Labour-Co-operative Member. I remind the House that the Co-operative Wholesale Society is the largest commercial farmer in the United Kingdom. It was in West street, in Brighton, 170 years ago, that Dr. William King and others set up both a retail shop and a school that were based on co-operative principles. Brighton, with Rochdale, can justly claim its place as being the birthplace of the UK Co-operative movement. Today, Rochdale and Brighton both have Labour Members, and our country has a Government who hold firmly to the co-operative ideal that we achieve more by working together than we do by working alone.

Sir Derek Spencer was my immediate predecessor in the House. He was a Yorkshireman by birth, and his ability as a lawyer was recognised almost immediately after his election to the House, in 1992, by his elevation to the post of Solicitor-General—an office that he held and performed ably throughout the life of the previous Parliament. That job is vital, but, unless there is a major controversy, it does not attract the limelight. Sir Derek's period in office was free of controversy, which reflects the conscientious way in which he filled the post.

Before Sir Derek, the seat was held for 20 years by Sir Julian Amery. Some hon. Members may remember Sir Julian's distinguished career as a Minister, particularly in housing and in the Foreign Office. He was an ebullient personality who entered politics with an already distinguished record of war service, much of which was spent behind enemy lines in central Europe. Despite political differences, those of us who knew him remember an enthralling and witty raconteur, whose modest recounting of his wartime experiences nevertheless made one aware of a man of real courage.

Many hon. Members will know my constituency as a place where they go for conferences. I should say that, if any of my hon. Friends have not yet secured accommodation for September, perhaps they would like to speak to me after my speech. The conference centre, the Royal Pavilion, the busy seafront, the shopping areas of Western road, the Lanes and North laine will be known to many hon. Members. I should like, however, to draw the attention of hon. Members to aspects of my constituency that are sometimes overlooked. We have two universities, for example, which produce 6,000 graduates a year—a factor that helps to place us at the forefront of the new and expanding multimedia industries. We are also attracting more high-tech industry to the town.

My constituency is a place that many people plan to visit—just as I did 30 years ago—but in which they decide to stay. The town centre of my constituency, however, is also a place in which one in three residents are out of work. In my constituency, 2,000 youngsters under 25 are jobless and wage rates are below the regional and national averages. Early in the 1990s, it also reached a record in repossessions. Those problems are the legacy of the previous Government, and I am glad that the new Government are dedicated to tackling them.

When people live on such low incomes and in such conditions of poverty, it is important that they should have the best possible information about the quality of the food that they eat, because such a huge proportion of their small income must go on ensuring that they have enough to eat. I therefore welcome the Government's proposals for a food standards agency, which my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food mentioned in his speech today. I believe that such an agency will have an essential role to play in making us all better informed about what is in our food. I am also glad to hear that he is already making preparations in his Department to ensure that Professor Philip James's recommendations will be implemented.

Some 70 years ago, my predecessor as mayor of Brighton, Sir Herbert Carden, had the foresight to persuade the town to buy up much of the surrounding countryside—including many of the farms, although they are outside the borough of Brighton. We therefore have a special concern in ensuring that our downland surrounding our urban area is protected. Protection issues involve not only management of the south downs—an issue on which I shall be lobbying the Minister with responsibility for environmental protection—but ensuring reform of the subsidy processes in the common agricultural policy that emphasise intensive farming methods at the expense of more environmentally friendly farming, which helps to conserve both our countryside and our natural heritage.

As a co-operator, I know that, for many years, issues of food safety and of enviro-agrifarming have been crucial in our campaign. I welcome the fact that they are now reflected in the proposals for reform of the CAP, and those proposals have my whole-hearted endorsement.

6.39 pm

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper) on his maiden speech and on taking us through the virtues of his constituency. My researcher was educated at one of the universities in his constituency—she was clearly well educated in Brighton because she made sure that I was returned to the House with an increased majority at the last election.

I understand that there is a time constraint, but before I comment on the reform of the common agricultural policy, I want to say one or two words about the beef industry in particular. Obviously, the new ministerial team will be aware that beef prices have been very low in Wales this year, lower even than at the height of the BSE crisis. The first problem is the high level of beef imports. I was pleased to hear the Minister confirm that, if necessary, he will introduce orders to ensure that beef imports are subject to the same standards as British beef.

Secondly, the Minister is well aware that the revaluations of the green pound have had a substantial impact on farmers' incomes. There are opportunities for us, through the European Union, to access funds that would assist farmers in their current difficulty. Of course, I realise that there would have to be matched funding from the Treasury but, given the plight of Welsh beef farmers at the moment, I urge the Government to consider that option.

We must seek substantial reform of the CAP but not at the expense of the viability of the small and medium family farm in Wales. We should be building on the MacSharry proposals and ensuring that family farms are protected even though we are changing the way in which we support the farming industry and the money to support it may be found in a different way.

We have no problems with the word "modulation". I understand that the Conservative party has problems with it and that the Minister does not wish to see modulation as part of the negotiations on reform. In Wales, we consider that modulation can be the way forward, especially in certain sectors—for example, in the milk industry in west Wales and in the beef and sheep industries in our upland areas. It is important to consider the matter carefully.

As we shift from aid to production to aid to the environment, it is vital that we examine carefully the extension of the agri-environmental payments. Professor Gareth Wyn Jones of University college of north Wales in Bangor has produced a paper that could be taken up quickly by the Welsh Office. It involves an integrated all-Wales scheme building on the success of Tir Cymen and environmentally sensitive areas. For the relatively modest cost of £23 million, we could have an integrated scheme in Wales.

Finally, any reform of the CAP must include an integrated rural programme. It is important to consider the future of farming in the context not only of agricultural incomes but of the rural way of life and rural developments. I urge the Government to consider using CAP reform as a way of integrating a rural policy. It is vital for the interest of the agricultural industry in Wales that we move forward in that context.

6.43 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I shall endeavour to keep it brief, because I am aware that other hon. Members have sacrificed their contributions to enable me to speak now. It has been a long journey getting to the point at which I can make my maiden speech—a frustrating journey at times, but an eventful one. I take great pride in now being able to address right hon. and hon. Members.

I should first say something about my predecessor in the constituency of South Thanet, Jonathan Aitken. Many hon. Members will be reading in the newspapers about some of his recent adventures. Far be it for me to comment on those matters, but Jonathan was a diligent constituency Member of Parliament for 23 years. He was well known for the amount of casework that he got through and for the quality of his work. Throughout the general election, he was never anything but courteous and respectful to me, and I have to say that he took his defeat on the chin on 1 May. I have read that, this week, a television broadcast is to be shown in which he was filmed, before the election, predicting his own defeat. I can say only that, had he told me that, it might have saved me a few grey hairs.

I must congratulate other hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. One claimed that his constituency was the birthplace of the family holiday. I should say in passing that my constituency, especially Broadstairs and Ramsgate, does a very good family holiday indeed. I am claiming not that my constituency was the birthplace of the family holiday but that it was the birthplace of the English. The peoples and traditions that ultimately became what we now call English began in east Kent, and South Thanet was at their heart. It is at the heart not only of what we call English but of European events over two millenniums.

It was to my constituency that the Romans came; they built their castle at Richborough and provisioned their invasion of Britain from there. It was also to my constituency, 1,400 years ago, that St. Augustine came, and we have been celebrating the anniversary of that event over the past few weeks. He was pretty reluctant to come in the first place. He was sent by Pope Gregory the Great to convert the English, but tried turning back at one point. We have often found that to be the problem in South Thanet—people are a little reluctant to visit us, but when they arrive, they receive a great welcome. That was true of St. Augustine.

St. Augustine made one bad mistake, however, from our point of view. Once he met Ethelbert on the banks of Pegwell bay, he insisted on going inland to Canterbury to form his base. Had he only stayed where he was, we would now have an Archbishop of Cliffsend and, more important, we might have a Ramsgate cathedral that would bring millions of people to our town.

We have been at the centre of many other European events over the years. The Vikings invaded our coastline. They might have left Canterbury cathedral alone but not Minster abbey—it was sacked by them but later rebuilt. If at the end of the day we do not have Canterbury cathedral, we have Pugin's own church in Ramsgate. Many hon. Members probably believe, incorrectly, that this palace was Pugin's masterpiece. It was not—his masterpiece was the church in Ramsgate, and I encourage all hon. Members to come and see it.

Given that time is short, I shall wind up my eulogy on my constituency by saying that it is not a place of prosperity, which brings me to the nub of my contribution to the debate. Part of my constituency stands in Thanet, and Thanet has the second highest unemployment in England. There are places in my constituency where male unemployment reaches 60 per cent. Our problems were recognised by the European Community which came to our aid with its objective 2 funding. That funding ultimately led to our Government giving us assisted area status.

[Dr. Stephen Ladyman]

Reform of the common agricultural policy is vital because objective 2 funding runs out in 2000. Money to help expand Europe will have to come from somewhere—either from the structural and regional development funds, on which my constituency depends, or from a reformed common agricultural policy.

I welcome the Government's initiative to reform the common agricultural policy. In passing, I would also like to encourage them to speak to EU Commissioners about compensation for farmers in Kent whose fruit crops were damaged by frost in May. In the short term, compensation would do a great deal for local farmers. In the long term, reforming the common agricultural policy, creating a sustainable agricultural industry in Britain and throughout Europe and ensuring sustainable rural development in my constituency are vital to the future of both the rural and the urban parts of my constituency.

I shall conclude my comments now, once again expressing my gratitude to those who have shortened their contributions to allow me to get in. I encourage all hon. Members to come to South Thanet as soon as possible to enjoy our variety of family holiday and to see deprivation at first hand and some of the good things that the European Union is doing in the United Kingdom.

6.50 pm

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) on his maiden speech. He spoke warmly of his predecessor. I am sure that he will wish to emulate in many ways—perhaps not all—his predecessor's success and hard work. He said that some crops in his constituency had been damaged by frost. Farmers in my area, which is probably the largest berry-producing constituency in the country, were similarly concerned by the frost damage earlier this year to berry canes and the consequences that that will have for the harvest.

When considering reform of the common agricultural policy, it is essential not to lose sight of why it was established. We must ensure that a favourable regime exists for continued agricultural activity as the principal mechanism of land use and management in our rural areas. However, there is a greater need to target funds more effectively, such as by taking labour and employment into account when allocating subsidies.

I should like to highlight two concerns about the beef and sheep markets, which are vital in Scotland and other rural areas. The Minister described the Opposition amendment as effrontery. That is the word that I was going to use, so I shall call it bare-faced cheek. I am no adherent of the Government's views, but the Conservatives have nothing to tell us about how to handle a beef ban. I urge the Government, as I have done before, to move as swiftly as possible to have the beef ban lifted. Beef farmers in my constituency reckoned that the market was recoverable if the damage was limited to one year, but if it extends—as seems likely—to two years, the problems will become greater.

I urge the Government to persuade our European partners not to become fixated on a drive simply to cut production without taking due account of opportunities to promote quality produce. The Scottish suckler beef industry produces the finest beef in the world. Why should quality produce be eliminated in a move to equalise production?

The sheep industry in Scotland is predominantly in the hill and upland areas and is inextricably linked to the fortunes of the hill livestock compensatory allowance scheme. It is essential that the Government closely monitor developments in HLCAs as a key component of sustainable rural life in Scotland.

The motion sets out the Government's determination to negotiate a deal

"which reflects the interests of United Kingdom consumers, taxpayers and food and farming industries".

None of us could disagree with that aim, but the Government's success in delivering it will rest on the nature of the deal that is secured. I hope that, when the deal is reached, the Scottish farming community will be able to give a more positive response than the Scottish fishing industry has given to the result of the Amsterdam summit. The Government will be judged on that in their proposals to reform the CAP.

6.54 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): This has been an interesting debate. We have heard excellent maiden speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) and from the hon. Members for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn), for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper) and for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman). They all made model maiden speeches which were extremely fluent. In the best traditions of the House, they paid generous and fair compliments to their predecessors. My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden referred to the tragic circumstances in which we lost a good friend and colleague. The generous comments that Labour Members made about the previous Members whom they defeated at the election do them credit and do credit to the House.

The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby in particular made too much reference to landslides. As the first Member to speak from this Dispatch Box since the election of my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) as the new leader of the Conservative party, I must tell Labour Members that they mislead themselves with talk of landslides. The Labour party may have done well at winning seats at the election, but it did not do so well in its share of the popular vote. Only a 6 per cent. swing is required to unseat Labour at the next election, and I assure Labour Members that we Conservatives will be working very hard to ensure that they are unseated.

We shall start from the rural base, which we strongly represent. We shall do well in the countryside partly because country people are already concerned that this urban Government are seeking to impose urban values on the countryside. Anyone who doubts that fact need only see the number of people who will come from all corners of Great Britain to Hyde park on 10 July, concerned about a private Member's Bill, given tacit support by the Government, which threatens what they see as rural values. They are also concerned about other issues such as the right to roam. Labour Members would do

themselves a service by talking less about landslides and giving a little more consideration to how to govern the whole nation.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): We have full confidence that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) will win as many seats in the United Kingdom as leader of the Conservative party as he did in Wales at the last election.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Can we now return to the matter in hand, which is the common agricultural policy?

Mr. Baldry: I have no doubt that at the next election we shall do well in Wales, taking seats back as we shall in every other part of the United Kingdom. The Government ain't seen nothing yet. Of course we have some way to go, but with all the talk from Labour Members of landslides and the feeling that they have the right to be on those Benches for ever, they would do well to show some humility, because the British people do not like the arrogance that they have demonstrated.

Neither we nor the farming community expected the Minister to secure a lifting of the beef ban in seven weeks, but we are concerned that as yet no apparent process seems to have been agreed with the Commission on further steps towards the lifting of the beef ban. That is a genuine and legitimate concern.

Dr. John Cunningham: When the previous Government agreed to the imposition of the Florence terms, they got no agreement that if those terms were met the ban would be lifted at any time or on any date. That is why we are stuck where we are.

Mr. Baldry: The right hon. Gentleman knows that that is simply and clearly not a fair assessment.

Dr. Cunningham: It is true.

Mr. Baldry: No, it is not a fair assessment at all. The right hon. Gentleman is discovering what we experienced over the certified herds scheme, for example. When we thought that we had secured an agreement with Community colleagues, committees such as the Scientific Veterinary Committee sought to intervene and find new terms. That is the difficulty that the right hon. Gentleman is finding. Before the election, the Labour party talked about the lifting of the beef ban as an urgent priority. We are entitled at least to some clear enunciation of the process by which it intends the ban to be lifted.

We are glad of the progress that the Government have made and of their determination on beef imports, but in fairness it was my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) who invited SEAC to give the Government advice—which it did—that has enabled matters on imports to be brought forward. We shall be judging—as will the farming community—what the Government seek to do on beef imports and getting the beef export ban raised. Unless they succeed sooner rather than later, not only the Opposition but the whole country will be saying that they can no longer hide behind the excuse of being in government for only seven weeks.

7.1 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): Time is extremely short and there is no way I can attempt to do justice to all the speeches in the debate.

In response to the specific question asked by the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), we are actively working on the cattle database issue. I freely admit that there was a six-week delay due to the election. Although I do not think that that delay should have occurred, I do not apportion blame for it. A competition for the work was freely entered into before the election, but the consultants who won it were never appointed. Although they could have been appointed, I do not blame the previous Government for that not being so, and I certainly do not blame the civil service. The time was lost due to the election.

We are working very quickly on the issue and our intention is that the database will be up and running well in advance of the European Union requirement. I hesitate to say that that will be at the end of this year or early next year because that would tie me to that, but we are working on such a scale and decisions are due to be made soon on the direction in which we shall go.

I turn to the speech of the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), the former Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who is off to other pastures following this debate. He was very unfair to my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary. The right hon. and learned Gentleman knows full well that my hon. Friend could not go to the Lincolnshire show because there was a statement on fishing yesterday. My hon. Friend deals with fishing matters for the Government and was briefing every hon. Member with an interest in fishing—including the successor to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's former constituency.

Far be it from me to say that the countryside has turned against the Labour Government. Although I am the worst person in the country to claim so—others must claim it for me—I think that I was very well received by a wide range of country, agriculture and food interests at the Cheshire show on Tuesday. I remind the Tory party that no fewer than 47 new Labour Members on the Benches behind me represent wholly or mainly rural constituencies, so we take no lectures whatever in that respect.

My main function is to pay tribute to the maiden speeches in this debate. I certainly pay tribute to the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman)—a fellow west midlands Member of Parliament. I pay tribute to the way in which she spoke of Iain Mills—with whom I served in the House over many years—and of our region. I say "our region" because only sometimes can I speak for myself instead of for the Government at the Dispatch Box. I am a west midlands hon. Member, and proud to be so. The hon. Lady spoke up for the west midlands—indeed, the centre of the country—in a way that was a great tribute to herself and her constituents. I was particularly gratified by her good words for the national exhibition centre.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) paid tribute at some length to John Sykes and Sir Michael Shaw and certainly put on the line the benefits of his constituency. I have visited both parts of his constituency as a tourist, especially Esk valley.

[Mr. Jeff Rooker]

As a fellow engineer, I agree with his comment about the lack of engineers in the House, which has far too many lawyers.

We all felt for my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper), who made his maiden speech. He is certainly a co-operator, and that is fine. Government Front Benchers will certainly be looking for his co-operation as the months go by. He made great claims about the efforts of Brighton, Pavilion as a tourist centre. There is a good exhibition centre there—there is a bigger one in the west midlands. We are all looking forward to cut prices in Brighton later this year.

In his maiden speech my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), paid fine tribute to Jonathan Aitken, who—I believe—entered the House on exactly the same day as me in February 1974.

I must mention the speech of the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), who was once one of the Whipless eight and who called for adult politics, which I reinforce. We need an adult arrangement when we are discussing agriculture and food policy. There should be no knee-jerk reactions to every minor headline. If we are adult, we can protect the agriculture and food industry and the thousands of people who work in it, and give our constituents, all of whom are consumers, a better service than in the past when politics was somewhat juvenile in the hothouse of this Chamber. The fact that the hon. Gentleman is my pair is irrelevant to my remarks.

The Government are committed to working with the food industry. I say the food industry and not the agriculture industry because everyone involved in agriculture is part of the food production industry—

It being three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Order [12 June].*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 136, Noes 357.

Division No. 37] **[7.7 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard *(N Essex)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merchant, Piers
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Richard Ottaway and Mr. Peter Ainsworth.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allan, Richard *(Sheff'ld Hallam)*
Allen, Graham *(Nottingham N)*
Anderson, Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne *(Aberd'n S)*
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Blizzard, Robert
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Thomas
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Christine
Byers, Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie

Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles (Norwich S)
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain *(Hammersmith & Fulham)*
Colman, Anthony *(Putney)*
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Curtis–Thomas, Ms Clare
Dafis, Cynog
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Ms Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela (Wallasey)
Eagle, Ms Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael John *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Ms Jane *(Reading E)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Ms Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Ms Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Miss Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Tessa
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Ms Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Merron, Ms Gillian
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Ms Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Hara, Edward
Opik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Ms Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Ms Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steven
White, Brian
Whitehead, Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Dr Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*

Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wright, Tony *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Clelland and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House takes note of European Community Document No. 6627/97, relating to agricultural prices for 1997–98; welcomes the Government's intention to negotiate an outcome which reflects the interests of United Kingdom consumers, taxpayers and food and farming industries; and welcomes the Government's longer term aim of securing reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy which reduce food prices, save money and provide more targeted support for the rural economy and enhance the rural environment.

SCOTTISH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 100(1) (Scottish Grand Committee (sittings)),

That the Scottish Grand Committee shall meet at Westminster on Tuesday 8th July at half-past Ten o'clock, to take Questions for oral answer and to consider a substantive Motion for the Adjournment of the Committee.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

Transport (Waveney)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

7.21 pm

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): I am extremely grateful that my topic has been selected for debate this evening. It means a great deal to the people of Waveney, which is, of course, Britain's easternmost constituency.

I should also like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Under–Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on her appointment.

One of the key elements of transport policy has come to be the concept of sustainability. Transport must comply with the requirements of a sustainable environment, yet it must, of course, also sustain an economy. As Labour's business manifesto rightly pledged, we must ensure that we provide the modern transport infrastructure that business needs, which allows business to be competitive. The transport links to Lowestoft and Waveney simply do not provide that at the moment.

If one were to draw a map of Britain based not on conventional linear distance but on travel time, my constituency and north-east East Anglia would lie at the end of a very long peninsula indeed.

Let us look at the roads. Most visitors to our district arrive late. I remember the President of the Board of Trade telephoning from a point on the A12 between Colchester and Ipswich, having looked at the map distance, and saying, "We'll be there in half an hour." Unfortunately, the A12 beyond Ipswich peters out into a single carriageway with slow bends, un-bypassed villages, and tractors.

The A47, linking us to the midlands, is much the same. Business men who turn off the A1 and see the road sign "Norwich 120 miles"—Lowestoft is not mentioned, of course—and then soon become stuck behind two lorries following a tractor, with little chance to overtake, admit to having a sinking feeling. Some never come back. I believe that my hon. Friend will find that our area is further from the continuous dualled road network than any other part of England.

I shall now deal with rail transport. There are lines from Lowestoft to Ipswich—with another station in my constituency, at Beccles—and from Lowestoft to Norwich. However, the journey to Ipswich takes longer and is more expensive than by car. Therefore, apart from a few services at peak times, most trains are fairly empty, which is a great shame.

Railtrack has told me that it would be prepared to invest in a passing loop at Beccles, which would permit a more frequent service, but only if the train operator, Anglia Railways, will guarantee more income to provide Railtrack's rate of return. That seems to pass all the risk on to the operator and may explain why the Secretary of State has had to complain about Railtrack's level of investment. Even with a passing loop, the journey time would not be quicker. Massive investment in segregating the many crossings—of roads, lanes and farm tracks—would be necessary to allow safety speed limits to be raised.

The economic consequences of the failure to modernise transport links in line with much of the rest of the country have been severe for people in my constituency.

While we have lost many traditional industries, such as shipbuilding, canning factories, a coach works, and shoe making—it was announced today that the last vestiges of the shoemaking industry in Lowestoft will disappear, with the loss of 48 jobs—we have been unable to attract new firms and new inward investment.

New companies invariably prefer to locate close to a modern road network. Just compare the employment statistics within the same region, for Cambridge, Bury St. Edmunds and Ipswich on the A14 corridor, with the figures for Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth. They tell a significant story. Unemployment is double the regional average in Lowestoft, and has been for many years. People in my constituency are fed up with being told that they are in the unemployment black spot of East Anglia.

The link between good road communications and economic success is well illustrated all over the world. I note the study by Cardiff business school on the impact of the A55 improvements in north Wales. It concluded:

"There is no doubt that the impact of the A55 improvements have been both substantial and significant to the economy of North Wales."

A manufacturer from the Isle of Anglesey said:

"Completion of the A55 improvements has eliminated for good the peripheral status of North Wales."

I note that even BT, with all its new technology and new forms of communication, recently chose Brentwood as the location for a new base, because it is well served by modern roads.

In every local survey of business in Waveney, poor transport links are seen as the biggest obstacle to economic success. I do not seek new roads, just a modernisation of existing trunk roads. Improvements to the A47 and A12 were cut out of the programme by the previous Government. People felt betrayed and neglected by that. Those schemes need to be reinstated.

I do not support unbridled road building. My response to widening the M25 and other such schemes is that if six lanes or four are not enough, one should diversify to a more balanced transport system, but let us have a level playing field, so that all parts of our country have a chance to share in economic prosperity and to cast off peripherality.

People in Waveney were delighted that in Labour's manifesto there was a clear commitment, which we have seen honoured today, to conduct

"an overall strategic review of the roads programme against the criteria of accessibility, safety, economy and environmental impact".

We are pleased to note that the first criterion mentioned was accessibility.

There is certainly great potential in Lowestoft and Waveney for industrial and tourism development. There is plenty of cheap land. The labour force is hard-working and loyal, with low costs. It is a pleasant environment with room to breathe. Lowestoft is Britain's eastern cardinal point, with, officially, England's best beach, and an entrance to the Broads national park. Most important, it is Britain's easternmost port, pointing straight at Europe. Lowestoft is not the end of the line; it is on the way to Europe.

The keystone of the new Government's thinking on transport will be an integrated transport policy. I welcome that. Lowestoft has the ideal opportunity for an integrated transport policy. We have a combination of sea—with the new European emphasis on short sea shipping—road and rail. The railway tracks in Lowestoft run right up to the port, parallel to the quayside. There are plenty of sidings. There is already an expanding container shipping company trading with Scandinavia, but it currently uses lorries to carry goods between Lowestoft and the north-west and the midlands.

Here lies the opportunity for a rail freight terminal, but it will require investment from Railtrack and Associated British Ports, and new momentum from a rail freight operator. There is the opportunity in the next three years of matched European objective 5b funding. I should like the Government's regional office to take a more proactive role in that area, and I hope that the new regional development agency will have that brief.

I mentioned the potential for an integrated policy in Lowestoft, with intermodal links between sea, rail and road. However, one major problem lies in the way, and the people of Waveney would say—in reference to the title of the debate—that it is the biggest transport problem of all. It is known locally as "the bridge". The A12 passes through the entire length of Lowestoft, including the town centre. The town is cut in two by a river—although it is not really a river, but a long, deep inlet, which forms the inner harbour.

The A12 crosses the waterway by means of a bascule bridge—a lift-up bridge—which has to be opened every time a ship uses the port on which our prosperity depends. The bridge is the only crossing point in town, as the next one is at Oulton Broad, almost two and a half miles inland. The traffic flow across the bridge is the second highest in Suffolk. When the bridge opens, the town is brought to a standstill, literally. The congestion thus formed takes a long time to clear, and in summer, when we attract tourists, there is frequent gridlock.

That situation is, I believe, unique and has to be seen to be believed. My hon. Friend the Minister recently witnessed the spectacle and saw a Chinese junk passing through. I hope that that is indelibly etched on her memory. She should visit Lowestoft in summer, when the situation is at its worst. Anyone who has not seen it may imagine London with half its bridges missing and the other half lifting up frequently. Frequently—and twice on bank holidays in recent years—the bridge breaks down. Not even a pedestrian, let alone the emergency services, can cross. The town is snapped in two.

Clearly, that presents an economic problem and affects the commercial activity of the town. It seems to make our drive for increased tourism self-defeating, and has distorted the development of the town. Many decades ago, one bridge was enough, but Lowestoft has grown. Like blown glass in an egg timer, the two sides of the town have expanded, but the constriction in the middle remains, becoming relatively worse.

That situation also presents an environmental problem. The air quality tests carried out in the enclosed Victorian streets that form the southern approach to the bridge show alarming results. The whole area, known as Kirkley, has been degraded by the effect of continuous congestion. All the quality of life indicators for the area—unemployment, poverty, health and crime—are so poor that the area qualified for single regeneration budget funding last year. As was recognised in the bid, the area cannot be successfully regenerated without removing the trunk road traffic.

[Mr. Bob Blizzard]

Fortunately, there is a solution and it has been known for years—a new, second river crossing and a south Lowestoft relief road. That was consulted upon, a preferred route established and much of it designed only a few years ago. A start date in the mid-1990s was envisaged. However, it was relegated and then deleted from the trunk roads programme. Traditional ways of evaluating road schemes never addressed the full range of economic and environmental benefits that that would bring to the town. Those benefits are mainly local, but I fear that without the new crossing, Lowestoft will find it difficult to develop successfully in the next century.

The corridor has been protected for many years; it is protected by the county and district councils. No demolition is required and no environmental damage would be caused. This is the dominant issue in Lowestoft. The solution that I have described would permit traffic calming and cycleway development on the existing dangerous road. It would raise the quality of life in the town and bring us into the 21st century.

As I have shown, there is the potential to regenerate Lowestoft and develop the port by integrating sea, rail and road modes. However, as things stand, the more port activity there is, the more the bridge is lifted and the more dysfunctional the town becomes. An integrated transport policy could make a difference economically, but there must be investment in a second river crossing to stop each mode getting in each other's way.

Apart from Lowestoft, the constituency of Waveney consists of parts of rural north Suffolk, including the large village of Kessingland—the only place in my constituency bypassed by a dual carriageway. In fact, there are only about three miles of dualled road in my constituency. The historic small market towns of Beccles and Bungay are the other main settlements in Waveney. The main transport issue in those towns is heavy lorries passing through ancient narrow streets.

In Beccles last year, the deputy mayor's wife was nearly killed by a lorry. She was walking on the pavement, while the lorry kept to the road, but as everything is so narrow, she was knocked under the lorry by a wing mirror. Bungay, with equally narrow streets, has a particular problem. It is directly on the only viable route from Bernard Matthews's turkey farms to the processing factory at Holton to the south. The townspeople, surrounding villages and the company all want a satisfactory solution to the problem.

The Bernard Matthews situation deserves particular attention. The company is a massive and vital contributor to the East Anglian economy, with thousands of jobs involved. The company has a great loyalty to East Anglia, but the poor quality of local roads makes the operation of the business more difficult. The company is expanding, and several foreign Governments would love Matthews to locate in their countries. We should take note.

My speech may seem like a long shopping list of transport improvements and, in a sense, it is. But nobody expects the new Government to quickly wave a magic wand. People are only too aware of the financial constraints and strictures, but they do expect a start. For too long, East Anglia—with the exception of the A14—has been overlooked for transport investment, and the far corner of the region, where my constituency lies, has been overlooked most of all. Our transport system is anything but modern.

I end as I began, by stating what we all recognise. We must ensure that we provide a modern transport infrastructure, to enable our businesses to compete successfully in Europe and the world, and to bring the employment that will create a society of which we can be proud. The people of Waveney do not want to be left out.

7.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) for his congratulations, and I return the compliment by congratulating him not only on securing the debate, but on being returned to this House for what I have no doubt will be a long parliamentary career. He touched on many of the central issues affecting his constituency—its location, and the serious effects that this has on the economy, and its transport infrastructure.

I am aware of concerns from the coastal areas to the north and east of East Anglia that their remote location and lack of high-quality links to the national road network are adversely affecting their economies and development prospects. In Lowestoft—the main town in my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney's constituency—these concerns are coupled with worries over the effect of heavy traffic flows and congestion on main roads in the town. The concentration of movements on Mutford lock bridge and the bascule bridge, which are the only connections between the two halves of the town, is a significant problem. My hon. Friend gave some detail of the difficulties.

One of the first priorities of the new Government is the creation of effective regional development agencies across the country. Their task will be to co-ordinate regional economic development, help attract inward investment, and support business. Last week, we published a discussion paper on RDAs, seeking comments on their objectives, role and functions. It is our intention to introduce effective RDAs by April 1999 in all regions, taking account of local views on how they will operate.

Transport planning, transport operation and the provision of transport infrastructure are just some of the activities in which RDAs might become involved. Before making any decisions, we will carefully consider the views expressed during the consultation process. The issues described by my hon. Friend are exactly those in which we would expect RDAs to take an interest. I have little doubt that he will represent his views and his constituents' concerns to the review.

My right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport earlier today announced our proposals for carrying out our manifesto commitment for a strategic review of the national road programme. Again, we intend to consult widely on that review, the objective of which will be to determine the role that trunk roads should play in a sustainable transport system and to establish a forward investment programme for the trunk road network in England. It will have a wider focus than previous trunk road reviews, and will contribute to our thinking on an integrated transport strategy, the necessity for which—for supporting the economy and enabling it to develop—my hon. Friend explained in some detail.

Consultation will be launched in July, inviting responses by the end of October. We hope to announce the conclusions of the review next spring.

Both those exercises demonstrate the importance we attach to regional economic development and the close involvement of local authorities, businesses and the community in the development of their areas. The new organisations and programmes we will put in place will ensure more effective economic development strategies. By consultation and creation of regional bodies, decisions will be taken at the appropriate level.

My hon. Friend referred to some roads in particular. The A11, A12 and A47 trunk roads connect the Waveney area to the rest of the country. In recent years, £250 million has been invested in improvements to the A11 and A47, but we are aware of the importance attached to the completion of dualling the A11 from the M11 to Norwich. Three schemes now remain, including the Roudham Heath-Attleborough improvement, which has cleared all its statutory hurdles.

The previous Government made substantial reductions in the proposals for the development of both the A12 and A47. Those reductions included the withdrawal of both the strategic route dualling and local environmental bypass schemes. Again, my hon. Friend touched on both actions. The Waveney and Great Yarmouth areas are particularly concerned about the completion of dualling the A47 from Norwich to Great Yarmouth, which would complete a dual carriageway connection to the national road network via the A11.

The opportunity is now there for local interests to influence the trunk road programme in the review that we have announced. No doubt strong representations will be made, and they will be considered carefully, along with the other points that my hon. Friend so tellingly made.

The A48 from the A1 to Great Yarmouth is one of the first six roads in the country for the Highways Agency's route strategy approach. A comprehensive strategy for effective management and improvement of the whole route will be produced.

Waveney has been significantly affected by the removal of the A12 Wrentham bypass and the Kessingland-Pleasurewood schemes. The latter would have produced a completely new A12 route through Lowestoft, and included a third harbour crossing between the Mutford and bascule bridges. With the North sea on the east and Oulton broad on the west, it is not possible to take a conventional bypass around Lowestoft.

In recent years, my Department has given strong financial support to both Norfolk and Suffolk county council improvements to the A143-A146 primary route, which links the A14 at Bury St. Edmunds with Waveney and Great Yarmouth. Those improvements have been a series of bypasses of local communities, most recently Rickinghall-Botesdale, Scole-Stuston and Brockdish-Needham. The much improved road serves communities along the northern boundary of Waveney, such as Bungay and Beccles, as well as Lowestoft.

My hon. Friend described the considerable local problems of congestion within the main town of Lowestoft, and their effect on the efficiency of local businesses. Traffic movements are concentrated on the two bridges, and there are particular problems when the A12 bascule bridge is lifted to allow shipping to pass between the inner and outer harbours.

As my hon. Friend said, I have witnessed the operation. May I reassure him that it is, indeed, indelibly printed on my memory? The bridge is of critical importance to the local road network. Recent inspections have shown that it is in generally good condition, and it does, of course, receive regular maintenance, as well as replacement and refurbishment of major components.

The A12 Kessingland-Pleasurewood improvement through Lowestoft was withdrawn, because it was a very expensive urban scheme, with the third harbour crossing a particularly expensive element. The scheme would have catered mainly for local traffic. Consideration was given to taking the scheme forward as a design, build, finance and operate project, but shadow tolling would still place a considerable burden on the Department's budget. Faced with tight limits on expenditure, a third harbour crossing for Lowestoft could not be regarded as a high priority for investment in national terms.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the importance of rail to his constituents and constituency. We want to ensure that greater use is made of the railway, with more passengers and freight travelling by train. The railway system must be run in the public interest, with higher levels of investment and the effective enforcement of train operators' service commitments. The Government will use all the tools at our disposal to ensure that the public interest always comes first.

Anglia Railways, which provides train services from Lowestoft to Norwich and Ipswich, is turning in a good performance against its passenger charter targets for both punctuality and reliability. Its £200,000 "bikes on trains" project, part funded by my Department, has led the field in developing facilities for the carriage of cycles on trains. Its local trains will now carry four bicycles each, and it has earned the first ever cycle mark. It is also involved in a £1.6 million capital challenge project with other operators, Railtrack and local authorities to provide real-time passenger information at stations throughout the area.

We are also keen—as is my hon. Friend—to see more freight being carried by rail, and I know that some businesses in Lowestoft are considering rail freight. English, Welsh and Scottish Railways is taking a very positive attitude to seeking new business, and Railtrack has recently appointed freight officers in each of its zones. Grant is available for rail freight facilities, and we welcome worthwhile schemes.

We are working towards our White Paper on an integrated transport strategy. I have been impressed by the Lowestoft partnerships set up in Waveney to take forward an integrated approach to economic development and sustainable transport. Again, that was a theme highlighted by my hon. Friend tonight. Suffolk county council and Waveney district council, together with their community and business partners, have produced successful bids for transport package, capital challenge, single regeneration budget and European funding.

The main thrust of transport policy in Waveney is very much in accordance with Government policies. Investment is proposed to assist economic regeneration; encourage visitors and tourists; manage demand and promote alternative modes of transport; improve public transport services and facilities; provide safe links for pedestrians, the mobility-impaired and cyclists; enable physical improvement and improve social conditions; and reduce pollution.

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

The Lowestoft transport package was accepted in December 1996, with an initial allocation of £150,000 for 1997-98. Subject to satisfactory progress, further funding should be made available in future years. In the recent capital challenge round, £2.9 million has been allocated for completion of the Lowestoft northern spine road, which has also attracted substantial private sector investment and starts construction later this year. That scheme improves access to the A12 and A47 to the north for industrial traffic, and provides substantial environmental benefits to the town centre and adjacent residential areas.

I am happy to report that a high level of cycling has been maintained in Lowestoft, with investment by local authorities, the private sector and developers. Capital challenge funding has provided an additional £250,000 towards strategic cycle routes in Lowestoft, north of Lake Lothing. Those are considerable investments of local transport funds.

As well as those transport investments, single regeneration budget and European objective 5b programmes are approved for regeneration of the Kirkley area and business support and expansion.

The local approach of combining economic development and sustainable transport is, as I have said, very much in accordance with the Government's policies. The councils are forging ever more effective partnerships with local businesses, the community and transport interests. The support of the chamber of commerce and industry and the Lowestoft 2000 economic regeneration partnership for recent bids has been significant. Quality partnerships are proposed with the local bus operators.

The Highways Agency and the Government office for eastern region have agreed to join the steering group of the Lowestoft partnership's south Lowestoft study of traffic problems and environmental and regeneration issues. The Highways Agency is responsible for the A12 through Waveney, and will work closely with the local authorities. The study will consider among other things the pros and cons of a south Lowestoft relief road on the line of the previous trunk road scheme.

Proposals for major road schemes followed by withdrawal create particular problems for development and regeneration in urban areas. The desirability of major urban road construction, such as the previously proposed A12 Kessingland-Pleasurewood improvement, has to be questioned, as we cannot cater for ever increasing use of the car in our towns. I was pleased by my hon. Friend's underlining of the concerns for the environment in his area.

That questioning must be accepted, and appropriate transport and development plans have to be produced. Waveney seems to be well on the way to doing that. Any proposals for major road construction would need to be well justified and supported.

I look forward to future package bids and to assessments of how effectively the investment in Waveney is delivering sustainable results. The Highways Agency and the Government office for eastern region will continue their involvement, in particular considering the way in which the management of the A12 trunk road fits into the general Lowestoft transport strategy.

On a national scale, in considering both the regional development agencies and the review of the trunk road programme, we will, of course, take careful note of any representations from Waveney and similarly placed authorities in Norfolk and Suffolk. I look forward to many conversations with my hon. Friend.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nine minutes to Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 20 June 1997

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Child Support Agency

[*Relevant document: The Fifth Report from the Social Security Committee of Session 1996-97 (HC282) on Child Support.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

9.34 am

The Secretary of State for Social Security and Minister for Women (Ms Harriet Harman): We want all children to have a good standard of living. Children whose parents are living apart are often worse off. Therefore, to tackle that, we want to help lone mothers to work and ensure that fathers pay their fair share through the Child Support Agency.

However, we must also begin to rebuild a consensus around the responsibilities of parents to support their children after relationships break down. The Government believe that children are entitled to the emotional and financial support of both parents. Every child has a right to the love, care and support of both parents. It takes two people to make a child. Both parents are responsible for conceiving a child, and both parents must fulfil their responsibility to that child as it grows up.

Parents are responsible for caring for their children as well as paying for them. That applies to fathers as well as mothers, and applies whether the parents are married, living together, separated, divorced or, indeed, have never lived together.

We in the House are familiar with talk about motherhood, but there is also the important issue of fatherhood. Fathers have much that they can—and should—provide for their children: much more than just their money. They have their time, energy, concern and attention. Fathers cannot be left to imagine that they do not matter to their children. If they feel worthless, they are all the more likely to behave irresponsibly. That is what the Government mean by children having a right to the emotional, as well as financial, support of both their parents. Our message, particularly to fathers, is: "We understand that your children need not just your money; they need you."

Today's debate will focus on the Child Support Agency and in particular will deal with how to ensure a proper system of child support, to secure a better standard of living for children after relationships break down. The Government believe that that can be achieved in two ways: by lone mothers working, and by absent fathers paying.

First, I refer to the mothers. Lone mothers in Britain are among the least likely to work and the most likely to bring up their children on benefit of lone mothers anywhere in Europe. In France, 82 per cent. of lone mothers work. That is more than their married counterparts. In Britain, the figure is only 41 per cent. Fewer lone mothers than married women work.

The Conservative Government left too many lone mothers dependent on income support. In effect, they said, "Here's your benefit. Come back when your children have left school." The result is that 1 million lone mothers are struggling to bring up 2 million children on the breadline, at a cost to the taxpayer of £10 billion a year and growing. However, research shows that 90 per cent. of lone mothers want to work. They do not want to depend on benefit. They want what all mothers want—the best for their children.

We have already set out our proposals to help lone mothers get off benefit and into work, which will include inviting them into the jobcentre, when their youngest child starts school, for advice on job search and information on training and child care. The Government believe that work is the best form of welfare for people of working age, and that includes lone mothers, but there is a connection between mothers working and fathers paying—our two objectives.

There is strong evidence that proper, regular maintenance helps lone mothers get back to work. The Policy Studies Institute, in its report on the first effects of the CSA, said:

"There is a clear connection between maintenance payments and the opportunity to get and keep paid work".

It also says—this is important for the income of children where parents do not live together—that lone mothers who work and get family credit, and receive maintenance, have a net disposable income 60 per cent. higher than those on income support. That is an extra £56 a week. Therefore, fathers paying is also part of helping mothers to work.

That brings us to the subject of the Child Support Agency. One reason why the Government called the debate is that we want to draw on the valuable experience of right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House in regard to the agency and to hear their views. While the Labour party is extremely concerned about the issue, I recognise that it is not a party political issue. The Liberal Democrats have important views, which we want to hear, and we shall no doubt hear further reflections from the Conservative party, which introduced the system.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I support everything that my right hon. Friend has said. However, not only is the function of the CSA important; accessibility is an important issue. A child is frequently used by the two aggrieved parents. It is important that absent parents should have access to their children, to ensure that they receive proper care and attention, especially on the emotional side. Can the Government do anything to ensure fair accessibility to children when difficulties are experienced?

Ms Harman: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. It is absolutely evident that a child's upbringing benefits from the involvement of his or her father, when the father no longer lives with the child. Obviously, that matter comes before the courts, but the Government's position is clear: wherever possible, access should be given, because it is good for the child. We want to support that and back it up.

[Ms Harman]

It is important to start our debate by being clear about what went wrong with the CSA, what is still going wrong with it and what needs to be done to put things right. The reason why the Child Support Agency was introduced was that the court-based system for child maintenance was failing.

Under the pre-CSA system, too many fathers simply did not pay. That is why the previous Government introduced the CSA. Some 77 per cent. of lone mothers on income support received no regular maintenance payments. Awards were too low. The average award for one child was only 11 per cent. of the absent father's income—on average, some £15 a week. Moreover, there was no fairness. Maintenance awards were inconsistent and unpredictable: fathers earning £150 per week would not know whether they would end up with an award of £5 a week for their child or £50 a week.

The previous Government attempted to solve those problems—everybody agrees that they were substantial and needed to be dealt with—by setting up the Child Support Agency. There was all-party support for their aim to ensure that absent fathers took proper financial responsibility for their children. However, the previous Government's attempts to make absent fathers pay proper maintenance for their children were disastrous. I genuinely regret that.

Today's debate provides an opportunity to set out why the Conservatives failed, so that we can build our child support policy on solid ground. We can now see that they failed children and parents by misunderstanding the problem, failing to develop a clear objective for the agency, refusing to listen to the warnings and constructive suggestions from those who pointed out in advance the problems with their proposals, and by drastically underestimating the size of the problem.

The previous Government misunderstood the political consensus around the need to make absent fathers pay proper maintenance for their children. The belief that that meant that the solution that seemed best to them commanded general support lulled the previous Government into a false sense of security. They thought that, because everyone agreed that fathers should pay, everyone would agree with their system to make fathers pay. The Tories did not set clear objectives, and the Child Support Agency was never given a consistently clear set of targets.

The agency was established with the intention that all absent fathers should face up to their financial responsibilities for their children. That meant that, initially at least, the CSA aimed to get at least some maintenance from all fathers—the point about responsibility—whether or not they had ever paid before. Inevitably, however, as the Conservative Government grew to see the agency's revenue-raising role as so important, more money was collected from certain groups of fathers, such as those who were already paying a small amount of maintenance. That was because it was easier for the agency to collect more money from fathers who had at least paid some maintenance before, than from fathers who had never paid before and were avoiding payment. A sense of unfairness therefore grew. Those conflicting priorities—whether or not the agency was about responsibility or getting money in—meant the agency lacked focus. That contributed significantly to the scheme's poor performance in its early years.

The Tories would not listen to criticism. When we were in opposition, we pointed out the flaws in the scheme long before it was introduced. We pointed out the damage that could be caused by an inflexible system and the need to respect existing property and capital settlements. Time and again, we presented the then Government with constructive proposals for change, but they were dismissed out of hand. Although the need for change was subsequently accepted, it was too late, and disasters had begun to happen. For example, we pointed out that, by ignoring travel-to-work and contact costs, the system was creating real hardship for some. That, too, was ignored for too long.

The previous Government also underestimated the scale of their task.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): The right hon. Lady complained that there was no clear objective for the agency. Does she intend in her speech to spell out the clear objective that she will set it?

Ms Harman: We have been in office some five weeks. As I set out at the outset of my speech, my instinct is that the clear objective should be the responsibility of parents, but we need to discuss that again. The objectives were originally set out, but became confused under the previous Government. Today, we are trying to take stock of the problem and move forward.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I agree with a lot of what my right hon. Friend has said already, but for any law to be passed and to work properly, it must appear to be fair. I have racked my brains to try to find another solution. Over the five years that the agency has been in operation, I thought that, first, it might have got rid of the backlog, and, secondly, that more people would have been brought in to make payments. I get the impression that the biggest source of grievance for my constituents—I am sure that it applies across the country, whatever the constituency—is that the fathers who are paying think that they are paying to make up for the thousands whom the agency cannot find. That is why the law is in disrepute.

I do not suggest that there is an easy answer, but the Government should be looking at a new formula to start afresh, based on the ability to get everybody in the net, and not leave some people out. It is like another poll tax: some people getting away with it and others having to pay.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. It is part of the deep sense of unfairness that people feel about how the agency has worked. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the biggest source of grievance is not the one which I readily acknowledge—that some fathers pay while others do not—but that too many children do not have a good enough standard of living, because some fathers are determined to avoid payment while others are prepared to pay, but want to do so as and when they feel like it and at an amount that they choose. The unfairness engendered by the CSA has undermined the public support that it needs to be able to proceed with the task on which we all agree.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): The Secretary of State said that the CSA was never set targets. I refer her

to the fifth report of the Select Committee on Social Security, which said that the Secretary of State set six operational targets for the year 1995-96, most of which were achieved. It would be more helpful if she explained what she is proposing for the CSA, rather than carrying on this rather childish attack on the outgoing Administration. She said that this should not be a party issue. Will she now make that clear by moving to an atmosphere of consensus, instead of carrying on in this Mandelson-like way, as she has been instructed to do by the Minister without Portfolio?

Ms Harman: I stand by what I said—this is not a party political issue. I do not seek to make party political points, but I want to present the House with the Government's analysis of what went wrong. The hon. Gentleman should try to assist in the process of sorting out the CSA. If he is saying that there were no problems, he is out of touch. Targets were set, but they were unrealistic and were abandoned for other targets. He should not defend what everybody now agrees is indefensible, and he should address his mind to moving forward.

The previous Government underestimated the scale and the difficult nature of the work to be done. Relationship breakdown often creates intense bitterness and resentment. Past evidence showed that many fathers simply did not want to face up to their responsibilities for their children. It was not an easy task. To make matters worse, the previous Government failed to see that rushing through the child support legislation without thoroughly examining the details of how the CSA would work in practice would lead to serious problems.

The CSA was set up in a difficult context, without clear objectives and much too quickly, and faced numerous practical difficulties in its early years. It had a completely new team—some from outside the civil service, and some from within the civil service, but from unrelated organisations such as the Property Services Agency. They came together to do an immensely difficult job against a background of unclear objectives. They had no experience of the issues involved and had a much harder task than the Government realised. That led to misunderstandings and mistakes. The CSA had a new computer system, with all the teething troubles and operational problems that that always brings.

As a result, the CSA failed. It failed children, few of whom saw any improvement in their financial circumstances—which was what the CSA was supposed to be about. It failed lone mothers and absent fathers—lone mothers were still on the breadline, and absent fathers were angered and confused by unacceptably poor service. As my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) said earlier, they could not even get through on the telephone.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): The Secretary of State referred to improving children's standard of living in low-income households. Can I tempt her by referring to a very good device alighted upon by the Labour party last October, for making some savings? Under the heading "Maintenance Disregard", the document "Children First" says:

"A maintenance disregard, once introduced, will provide an incentive for co-operation which will mean consequent savings on income support."

She will know that parents with care who are on income support have the benefits that they receive withdrawn pound for pound for any maintenance that they receive. That is such a good Labour scheme for saving money in the long run that I can see no reason why she is not announcing its introduction today.

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. As the collection rate of the CSA increases, we shall keep under review the option of a maintenance disregard. However, where I differ from him is in the belief that there is no point in a father paying if the mother is on income support. I do not believe that, for two reasons. First, there is a point of principle—not an airy-fairy principle, but one about children's understanding of the situation. I do not want any child to understand that their father has abandoned responsibility for them and has decided that they should rely on the state.

Secondly, another more practical matter in the Policy Studies Institute report to which I referred is that, if a father is paying maintenance—and therefore the children are dependent on maintenance rather than benefit—the mother can get a part-time job once the children reach school age, and right away she will be better off. She will be better off depending on maintenance while going out to work and improving her income, because she is not in the benefit trap.

Mr. Kirkwood: The Secretary of State perhaps makes my point for me. Will she confirm that under the system of family credit, there already is a £15 disregard? Why should there not be a £10 disregard in the maintenance situation that I have just described?

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point, and we shall continue to look at it. We shall put it on our agenda, and I thank him for raising it.

The CSA failed children, lone mothers and absent fathers, but it also failed its staff. They, too, bore the brunt of the failure because of the mishandled introduction of the scheme. Hon. Members are only too well aware of the many problems caused by the ineffectiveness of the CSA. The parliamentary ombudsman has criticised its performance, as has the Social Security Committee.

I know that many colleagues want to discuss examples of the ineffectiveness of the CSA in some detail during today's debate, and I and my ministerial team look forward to hearing their points. I am sure that we all agree that the previous Government's failure to set up an effective system of child support left an explosive cocktail which hit everyone.

The statistics about the experiences of people caught up with the CSA are well known, but no less shocking for that, and we need to take stock of what happened. People telephoning the CSA have to ring about eight times before the telephone is even answered. That is not good enough, and I have asked the CSA to ensure that it has extra services on the telephone lines. Out-of-hours telephone services are also needed, so that people do not have to try to talk to the CSA from their place of work.

When people do get through, it can take many months—if not years—to get an assessment. I have asked the CSA to make sure that by the end of this year, it completes an extra 500,000 assessments and continues to

[Ms Harman]

improve the accuracy rate. If people complain about the level of their assessment, their appeals can take as long again to be dealt with. In the first year, more than half of all assessments were wrong and had to be redone. Backlogs of work mounted up, so that by the end of the CSA's second year in existence, there were more than 400,000 cases. That is 400,000 absent fathers, lone mothers and children waiting for assessment, not knowing what is going on and unable to ring up to find out.

As some absent fathers suffered hardship as a result of that catalogue of problems, many others saw the opportunity to use the CSA's administrative failings as a justification for their determination not to pay. Indeed, further operational problems resulted from deliberate attempts at disruption. Some fathers without justification denied paternity to cause delay. What message is that sending to children? Some refused to answer letters. Some flooded the CSA with time-wasting inquiries, adding to the problems. Fathers refused to pay the maintenance for which they were liable, not because paying it would cause them genuine hardship, but because they were simply not willing to face their responsibilities as fathers. It is a paradox that maintenance payment rates are only about 50 per cent., while income tax payment rates are 90 per cent. Absent fathers are meeting their responsibilities to the community through the tax system, while refusing to face their responsibilities to their own children.

Last week, a colleague sent me a letter from a man complaining about the CSA. He was really complaining about the fact that his girlfriend had got pregnant and had the baby. In the letter, he asked, "Is there no law to protect me from that?" The answer is no—but there is a law to prevent him ignoring his responsibilities to that child. Some fathers think that everyone else is responsible for their babies arriving in this world. One absent parent wrote to the agency complaining about his treatment, explaining that it was not his fault that the baby was born. In this case, it was not even the fault of the baby's mother—it was her parents' fault. The father said that they encouraged him to stay overnight in their house three or four times. He complained:

"Not once did any one of them mention anything about taking precautions so I presumed she was on the pill . . . because obviously if her parents didn't want a baby they wouldn't have encouraged me to stay".

That man was only 26. We will not accept that sort of behaviour, and we will pursue absent fathers who evade and avoid their responsibilities as parents.

As I have said, I think that the previous Government let down the staff of the CSA. I pay tribute to those staff. They work in an emotionally charged situation when family relationships have broken down and in an agency that must perform an important task, but which was beset with problems from the start. I understand the difficulties that dealing with an agency as ineffective as the CSA in its early years has caused for many of its customers. I understand the frustration and the despair that they feel. When dealing with people and such emotionally charged issues, there must be an acknowledgement of the need for an effective, efficient, polite and fair service. I make it clear that we expect all CSA staff to deal politely, fairly and promptly with their clients at all times.

However, we cannot and will not accept, condone or ignore threats and violence against CSA staff. Like all employees, CSA staff—who are carrying out the work of a democratically elected Government—have the right to work without being threatened, abused or harassed. I was horrified to hear about the offensive and threatening material that has been sent to CSA staff through the post. However, I am pleased to acknowledge that, despite the difficulties facing staff, there are clear signs that the position is about to improve.

While the agency has yet to succeed in increasing the proportion of lone mothers receiving regular maintenance, there have been clear improvements since the early days. Where maintenance is paid, lone mothers receive more maintenance—that is an important point. The level of maintenance for a child whose mother is on income support has increased from an average of £15 to £30 a week.

The agency is speeding up responses—although its response time is still too slow. The average waiting time for an assessment has decreased from nine months to six months in the past year. I have asked the agency to ensure that, by the end of this year, the overwhelming number of cases are correctly assessed and out the door within six months of their receipt. That is still a long time for people to wait, but it could be a benchmark of further progress.

The accuracy of assessments is improving. In 1995, only half of maintenance assessments were correct. That figure is now 87 per cent. It is still not good enough for those who receive wrong assessments, and there is still progress to be made, but we must acknowledge there has been at least some improvement. I have asked CSA staff to work hard in the next year to tackle the totally unacceptable backlog of work within the system and reduce it to a more reasonable level. I have had a series of meetings with the CSA chief executive, Faith Boardman—in whom I have full confidence—and I have asked her to work particularly hard in the next year on getting more maintenance paid, reducing the backlog and improving customer service.

There is still a long way to go and we shall not be complacent about the state of the agency. It is our responsibility to examine the agency's performance closely and constantly in order to ensure that it improves. I have impressed upon the agency's chief executive and my civil servants that substantial and sustained improvements must follow, and that I shall be answerable for them.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): Does my right hon. Friend accept that, because of the delays that she has mentioned this morning, many responsible fathers who have entered second relationships have suffered so badly that those relationships have also broken down, causing another group of children to suffer?

Ms Harman: I certainly do. When public policy that affects people's personal relationships is wrong, it causes a great deal of personal and emotional suffering. That is why it was so wrong for the previous Government to assume that the task would be easy and that, because everyone agreed about the principle, it would somehow be simple to sort out the arrangements on the ground. As my hon. Friend points out correctly, we are talking not just about the lone mother, the absent father and their children, but about a father's relationship with a second partner and subsequent children from that relationship. They are very important considerations.

Making child support work is crucial to improving the standard of living of children in Britain. We shall help lone mothers into work and we shall ensure that absent fathers pay. If the previous Government had listened at the outset to the concerns that we and others expressed, they could have avoided many of these problems. We understand the complexities of the current situation and, in the coming months, we shall examine closely all areas of the child support system to ensure that improvements are made. Today's debate presents an opportunity for all hon. Members to support the Government's determination to improve the performance of the Child Support Agency and to seek much greater improvement in future.

10.6 am

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): I welcome the opportunity to debate this subject for the first time with the Secretary of State for Social Security. Depending on what my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition decides over the weekend, it may be the last time that I address this important policy area in which I have enjoyed being involved. I welcome also the chance to debate the Child Support Agency—so long as the debate is constructive rather than disruptive and so long as we search for practical ways of improving the system rather than proposing digging it up by the roots, thereby making further improvements impossible.

The Secretary of State claimed that this is not a party political issue—nor should it be. However, like most Government spokespersons, she continued to operate in Opposition rather than Government mode: we have an Opposition in charge of a propaganda machine rather than a Government in charge of governing, although doubtless the latter will come in due course.

The right hon. Lady began by referring to the general policy towards lone parents. I am sure that was a legitimate reference—otherwise you would have ruled it out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker—which is relevant to the Child Support Agency. I am sorry that the right hon. Lady did not enlighten the House as to whether she intends to continue the parent plus scheme which would help lone parents back into work and is based on an examination of all such schemes worldwide. It would improve upon those schemes and provide the best possible system for this country. Will that scheme go ahead? People have been invited to tender for the scheme. Does the Secretary of State intend to pursue that process or is she so inured in the Opposition process that she cannot tell us how she intends to govern, even when she agrees with the objectives of this important policy? Will she pursue the policy of equalising benefits for lone parents with those available to married couples—or is that matter in perpetual review like most other issues that the Labour party addressed in its 18 years in opposition?

It is worth considering briefly the history of the Child Support Agency. As the right hon. Lady said, it was introduced on the basis of all-party consent. The Child Support Act 1991 had the support of all parties and there was not one dissenting vote. The rationale behind it, which was widely accepted, was based on a moral principle and on practical considerations. The moral principle was that parents are responsible for their children. That applies to both parents, and that responsibility continues even if, sadly, the parents split up or never marry or form a commitment to bring up children together. Parents have an obligation to contribute to the upbringing and maintenance of their children according to their means. The taxpayer has an obligation to contribute only if the parents do not have sufficient means between them to support their children.

The 1991 Act was based also on a practical examination of the old system's failures and a recognition that the courts had increasingly put parents' responsibility for their children below other responsibilities rather than at the top of the list. The courts had increasingly acquiesced in the transfer of responsibilities to the taxpayer and away from the parents. Lawyers had thought up devices to achieve that. Fewer parents were receiving maintenance payments and more were relying on income support and other benefits. The amounts that the courts awarded were often low, even derisory. Payments were set as low as £10 a week, or certainly less than £20 a week, even when the parents had the means to pay more. There was inconsistency in setting payments. Parents in apparently similar situations with an income of £150 a week, for example, were required to pay in one instance £5 a week and in another £50. Payments were either not enforced or enforced with great difficulty and delay.

The conclusions reached—with the consent of right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House—were threefold. First, it was accepted that parents, not taxpayers, should pay if they had the means to do so. Secondly, it was agreed that an agency rather than the courts should be responsible for tracing the responsible parents, assessing their liability and enforcing payment. Thirdly, it was accepted that the obligation to pay should be according to a formula and not a discretionary system. Those were the three bases of the Child Support Act, which had the overwhelming support of the House.

Once established, however, the system ran into immense problems. Administrative problems were compounded by the lack of co-operation of some parents. There was a perfectly understandable lack of co-operation when honest and honourable parents, as the majority are, were incensed by administrative delays. The problems were compounded also by deliberate non-compliance by some parents who were reluctant ever to accept responsibility for the children they had helped bring into the world. The two elements combined to make matters much worse.

The right hon. Lady suggests that all of that was foreseen. It was not. Her predecessor, the right hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar), now Secretary of State for Scotland, told the House:

> "Everyone in the House has been taken aback by the system's unpopularity and I agree that none of us anticipated that at the beginning."—[*Official Report*, 20 March 1995; Vol. 257, c. 32.]

The right hon. Lady is indulging in historical revisionism if she suggests otherwise. I would go so far as to say that the only two Members—when the Act took its place on the statute book, I had the responsibility for implementing it—whom I heard voicing doubts about it were the present Minister for Welfare Reform, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), then Chairman of the Select Committee on Social Security, and myself. I took the precaution of inviting all Conservative Members to my office in groups of 10 to warn them of the problems that would arise. I made the mistake, however, of doing that before the agency had been set up, and the problems did not arise until seven or eight months later, by which time my hon. Friends had largely forgotten my warnings.

[Mr. Peter Lilley]

It seemed to me self-evident that there would be problems. It was clear that there would be inevitable problems because we were trying to enforce a responsibility that previously people had not had to bear. It is worth considering why problems were not foreseen. I offer my analysis because I had to think about these matters long and hard when I was the Secretary of State responsible for them. I offer it to the right hon. Lady in the hope that it may be of help to her in avoiding similar problems in future. If she wishes, this is my parting gift to her. It is a genuinely objective analysis.

Problems are most likely to occur in government when there is the greatest measure of cross-party agreement and the greatest degree of enthusiasm among both officials and Ministers for a policy. The common belief is that politicians in the position that the right hon. Lady now holds, and which I previously held, face the greatest difficulty from "Yes, Minister" type civil servants who try to frustrate what we do. The right hon. Lady will find that they never try to frustrate. She has a wonderful team of officials who will loyally support and try to implement whatever she decides to do. I suspect that the greatest problems will arise when her officials have the greatest enthusiasm for her policy rather than when they have the natural reservations that they are there to articulate about the difficulties and problems in the real world on which the grand ideas of politicians will bear.

I warn the right hon. Lady against any attempt to politicise the civil service. Officials will create problems for her the more the Mandelson scheme of making the entire civil service an extension of the Labour party succeeds.

The second reason why we failed collectively to foresee problems was that the opposition that was voiced was based on a false hypothesis. It was said that problems would arise from women and not men. I was amazed when I first took responsibility as Secretary of State when the agency was about to come into being: in all the media interviews, I was asked exclusively about the opposition that was expected to result from women who would not co-operate or who would be disadvantaged in some way by the system—there was not one question about the potential hostility and opposition from men who would be asked to pay. The simple perception that if we ask men to pay several hundred million pounds some of them will resist was recognised by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead. He stated in a report, when the agency was already established, that a

"system that is, after all, designed to impose a more realistic burden on absent parents will result in protests from that group. We have already stated our view that it is right to increase the amount of financial support paid by parents for their children and to reduce the costs to the social security budget that are caused by parents not meeting their responsibilities."

The right hon. Gentleman clearly recognised that people do not always willingly accept their responsibilities. It was perhaps naive of the House to assume that they would do so.

A third factor that can give rise to a failure on the part of Government to foresee problems is a failure properly to appreciate the experience of other countries. I certainly advise the right hon. Lady to encourage her officials, and herself, to examine experience elsewhere. Every other country that has introduced a similar agency faced similar problems. None found any easy ways to get over those starting problems. At least we should have realised the scale of the problems that would hit us.

We promised to keep the system under review and to respond rapidly to problems, which began to emerge in the autumn or early winter of 1993, when the right hon. Member for Birkenhead made his statement. In February 1994 I introduced the earliest changes to the system. There were improvements in five areas, giving more absent parents extra time to adjust to their new liabilities by extending the groups covered by phasing arrangements, offering added protection to those on low incomes by improving the protected income arrangements, reducing the large amount of maintenance that some better-off absent parents had to pay, recognising that as children grow older the amount of attention that they need from the parent who cares for them reduces, and relaxing the rules on collection of fees rather than maintenance itself.

I also promised to keep the system under review and published a White Paper called "Improving child support" a year later. The White Paper introduced major changes which were implemented in two stages. First, in April 1995, we set a cap on the level of maintenance, so that no absent parent now has to pay more than 30 per cent. of his or her net income in current child maintenance. We also introduced new allowances into the maintenance formula—a broad brush allowance for property transfers made before April 1993, an allowance for travel to work costs for those living more than 15 miles from their place of work, and allowing absent parents to deduct all reasonable costs of housing for their new partner or stepchildren.

Those changes dealt with two of the features of CSA assessments that had given rise to most concern: the treatment of past property settlements, and the inability to take account of special factors, which were not reflected in the formula.

Secondly, we introduced in primary legislation an element of discretion in the formula—the departure system. That seemed to be the only satisfactory way of allowing for individuals with exceptional expenses or past property settlements that were not correctly reflected in the broad brush formula changes. In short, we recognised that there would be a small minority of cases where the relevant circumstances could not be adequately reflected.

After being successfully piloted, the departure scheme was implemented in December last year. To qualify for a departure, parents must meet two conditions. They must show that, because of special circumstances, they face additional expenses not taken into account by the formula, and they must demonstrate that they would be unable to support themselves if they were to pay maintenance at the level required by the formula.

As a result of those changes, the protests and difficulties have considerably diminished. The administrative performance of the agency has undoubtedly improved, and I pay tribute to the efforts of staff and the past and newly appointed chief executive of the agency in securing those improvements.

The Minister in the Lords, Baroness Hollis of Heigham, recognised only last month that

"the CSA has made enormous progress in the last year. Around 80 per cent. of assessments for child maintenance are now correct to the last penny, and some 98 per cent. of maintenance is passed on to the parent with care within ten working days.

This improvement owes much to the expertise and diligence of CSA staff, and I am grateful to them for their continuing efforts in often difficult circumstances."

The Baroness continued:

"I have been impressed by the determination of CSA staff to build on recent successes, and am confident they will continue to provide an increasingly efficient, accurate service."

I agree with her, and believe that we should do nothing to prevent that continuing improvement, while recognising that there is a distinct need for that process of improvement to continue.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: As a former member of the Select Committee on Social Security in the previous Parliament, may I assure my right hon. Friend that we were increasingly impressed and amazed at the prowess of the former chief executive, Ann Chant? Will he take this opportunity to pay tribute to her for all the work that she did for the agency? She brought it back on track at a time when it looked in danger of collapse, and she deserves a tribute from my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Lilley: I endorse my hon. Friend's remarks. Indeed, my previous remarks when I mentioned the present and previous chief executive were intended to convey my personal great gratitude to Ann Chant for the effort that she put in, and for her willingness to stay longer than her original commitment when I asked her to take on that bed of nails, as it undoubtedly was. I am grateful also to her successor for taking on one of the most difficult tasks in the public sector in this or any other country with a similar agency. We are fortunate in the calibre of the people who work for us.

What have we learnt today about the Opposition—I am sorry—the Government's approach to—

Mr. Bill O'Brien: I refer to the right hon. Gentleman's comment that during his stewardship, before the general election, a large proportion of the assessments were on target, to the last penny. I draw his attention to a letter that I received on 5 March 1997, just before the right hon. Gentleman lost his position. My constituent, a mother who was being chased for maintenance, received a letter stating that on 13 December 1993 her assessment was £118 a week. On 4 February it was changed to £115 a week, and on 11 April it was put back up to £117 a week. Is the agency now achieving targets by harassing claimants and advising them of three changes in five months? Is that how the right hon. Gentleman wanted assessments to be improved—by changing them every other week?

Mr. Lilley: No, that is certainly not the case. We are all aware of problems relating to constituency cases that we must look into, and we know that when we do so, we find that the complexity often arises from the complex and changing circumstances of the individuals involved. I cannot possibly comment—least of all, from the Opposition Front Bench—on the individual case that the hon. Gentleman is rightly pursuing on behalf of his constituent.

In similar cases in my own experience, the changes have reflected changes in circumstances or changes in information made available by one or other parent. The agency is charged by Parliament to reflect the circumstances of the parents, and to bring about reviews and changes when parents seek them and are entitled to have the findings of such reviews implemented. That has nothing to do with some artificial way of meeting targets.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): I should be reluctant for the right hon. Gentleman to leave this potted history without some mention of the punitive levels of settlement that have occurred in so many cases. I have a constituent who earns less than £14,000 a year, but he is being asked to pay £500 a month. In addition, he had left his ex-wife the house that was their residence. The levels have been punitive and unfair, and the accessibility of the agency remains gruesome. Will the right hon. Gentleman add that to his history?

Mr. Lilley: The hon. Gentleman is now part of a governing party. There is little evidence that Labour has yet grasped the reins of government, but it has grasped the reins of the communications system in Whitehall. The hon. Gentleman should ask the Secretary of State for Social Security and Minister for Women, the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), how she intends to change the formula to make it—in his view—equitable

The hon. Gentleman's remarks chime with what I was about to say. The Government published a policy document on the Child Support Agency and undertook to make it fairer. When the Government initiate a debate in the House, one would expect them to tell us in what ways the CSA was to be made fairer. Will they place a lesser burden on absent parents and thereby reduce the amount of money received by the parent with care? That seems to be what the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) wants and how he defines fairness. Or will the Government give more help to the parent with care and relieve further the taxpayers' contribution when the absent parent has the means to pay?

The Government were elected with a clear pledge to make child support fairer, but they did not specify what that pledge meant. We shall demand of them specifications of what they mean. Do they propose to change the formula, or will they now say, "Actually, when we said fairer, we were not referring to the formula at all: we intend to leave it unchanged"? I have no doubt that we shall have great support from Labour Back-Bench Members, to the extent that they are not muzzled by the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), in demanding from the Government some clarification of the pledges on which they were elected and for which Labour Members are responsible to their constituents.

The Labour party pledged in its document that it would undertake fundamental reform of the CSA. There are three fundamentals of the CSA. The first is the principle of responsibility; that parents are responsible according to their means. I am sure that the Government do not intend to overthrow that principle; the Secretary of State for Social Security and Minister for Women rightly repeated it today. The second is that an agency rather than the courts should deal with child maintenance. Is that principle to be reassessed, reformed or changed? The third is that maintenance should be determined by a formula rather than the limited discretion that we allow in the departure system. Does the Secretary of State propose to cease to rely on a formula and to give much greater discretion? If there is a commitment to fundamental reform, which of the fundamentals do the Government intend to reform and in what ways?

[Mr. Lilley]

It is an insult to the House to initiate a debate on a subject on which one has clear election pledges and not give us an inkling how the pledges will be implemented or even mention them. That is an extraordinary thing to do.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North–East Hertfordshire): The only thing that the Government have announced is an improvement in the telephone service.

Mr. Lilley: As my hon. Friend says, the only thing that the Government have said is that they will seek an improvement in the telephone service. Whether that improvement was already in the pipeline we shall undoubtedly elicit in due course.

The Labour party's most substantive pre-election commitment was to introduce a maintenance disregard so that people could keep some of the income support—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State says that it was not a commitment, but it was contained in a document entitled "Children First" published by her party which was pretty clear. It said:

"A disregard will be a powerful tool in our welfare-to-work strategy."

The document was published less than a year before the election. Are we now to understand that all that the Labour party told the electorate in the months ahead of the election was not a commitment, a promise, or anything on which we could trust it—that the "Trust me" Government cannot be trusted an inch?

What about the maintenance disregard? We heard nothing in the Secretary of State's speech about it except in response to a question from the Liberal Democract Benches. That is pretty extraordinary for a Government who have made a major potential spending pledge. The smallest disregard of which they have talked would cost £110 million a year. The Labour party made it clear that it hoped to finance the disregard by increasing the amount of maintenance paid into the Treasury by absent parents. We had no talk today of how the Government intended to increase the amount of maintenance paid into the Treasury.

I should like to hear a clear statement in the reply to the debate. Will the Government promise that if the revenues accruing to the CSA exceed those for which we budgeted in our spending plans, they will be used to finance a maintenance disregard? Will that disregard replace the maintenance credit that I introduced? We said that if people received maintenance while on income support, they would build up a credit which they could encash if they subsequently returned to work. That provided an enhanced incentive to return to work.

We believe that maintenance is often one of the best platforms from which to enable lone parents to return to work, and it was enhanced by maintenance credit. By contrast, a maintenance disregard increases the disincentive to work. It makes lone parents better off if they do not work. Like most policies that the Opposition—I am sorry, the Government, who still behave as an Opposition—have put before us and which they give the label welfare-to-work, their policy would make people move from work to welfare or stay on welfare longer.

We have heard little of anything concrete from the Government today. They said that there was no clear objective when they were asked what the clear objective was. They could not tell us. They said that we had failed to listen to warnings. They failed to point out any warnings that they made. We have shown that they were wrong about that.

The Government have announced a better telephone service, although we have not been told how it is to be achieved and whether extra resources will be made available for it. They have announced that 500,000 more assessments will be made by the end of the year. I can inform the House that the target that I set for the CSA was 500,000 more assessments by the end of the year. The Secretary of State is trying to take credit for something that I already announced in the business plan published and submitted to the House. I am flattered that she should think that what I have done is worthy of purloining, and that she is wearing my clothes.

Ms Harman: The right hon. Gentleman simply wrote it down.

Mr. Lilley: And the right hon. Lady simply reads it out.

We have therefore had little of substance today on the CSA. We know that it will always be a sensitive issue. In every country which has such an agency, even those which have had one for five or eight years longer than we have, it remains an issue which generates more correspondence for Members of Parliament than almost any other. That is because it deals with one of the most sensitive issues in people's lives at one of the most difficult and traumatic times in their lives. We have to ensure that we minimise the difficulties that the agency creates, keep it under review, reform it and improve it. I have no doubt that there will be a collective and constructive contribution from the whole House to achieving those objectives. It is only unfortunate that we have heard little that is constructive today from the Government.

10.36 am

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): The problems involving the Child Support Agency are serious. All that I can say to the Opposition spokesman on social security is that, in relation to the CSA, the Department that he left was a smoking gun. I support all that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said at the beginning of her speech. Parents should maintain their children. There should be love, affection and compassion for children from both parents. That is why it is my strong view that, where children are used by one parent and denied access to the other parent, we have an obligation to improve the situation.

This is a significant debate. It affects thousands of men, women and children. My work as a Member of Parliament is fraught with exchanges of letters, telephone calls and faxes with the CSA. I spend more time on cases involving the CSA than on any other issue, and the position is not improving but getting worse. The Opposition spokesman placed on record the work that he did to improve the service, but he and his party have let a lot of people down because, rather than improving under his stewardship, the work of the Child Support Agency deteriorated.

Mr. Heald: The hon. Gentleman may not have realised that the words that my right hon. Friend used were those of Baroness Hollis, who said:

"the CSA has made enormous progress in the last year."

She went on to congratulate the staff on their determination and their recent successes and said how confident she was that they were building an increasingly efficient and accurate service. Does the hon. Gentleman disagree with that?

Mr. O'Brien: I speak on the basis of my constituency experience and from what hon. Members tell me about the extra work load generated for them by exchanging letters and telephone calls with the CSA on behalf of constituents. I have not witnessed any increase in the CSA's efficiency; the opposite applies. The fact that service has deteriorated is supported by the report of the ombudsman, who cannot attend to all the referrals to him and by the fact that a new agency, the independent case examiner, had to be set up to deal with complaints of maladministration by the CSA. Surely the fact that the ombudsman has received so many justifiable complaints that he cannot deal with them confirms that the CSA's operations are not in people's best interests. That is the result of the work of Opposition Members and, in particular, of the former Secretary of State for Social Security.

The record of the CSA since it started in 1993 is abysmal. It is costing a great deal in compensation to victims. The report of the ombudsman notes the number of cases where compensation for maladministration is being approved. It costs taxpayers a lot of money: the computer system had to be replaced at a cost of some £750,000. Above all, there is the cost of a great deal of suffering and stress caused to many people who cannot understand how the CSA operates. The last Adjournment debate before the general election campaign was on the Child Support Agency. I said that, in view of its record, and the hardship and hurt that it was causing, it should be wound up and we should put in place a more honest system that will treat people fairly. The CSA is not doing that.

Letters have been lost. I have had to resubmit letters to the CSA because it had lost letters from Members of Parliament. One would have thought the identification on our envelopes and letterheads would inspire the CSA to ensure that such letters do not go astray. If letters from Members of Parliament are being lost, letters from applicants are being lost. When applicants draw attention to the loss of letters or applications, the CSA denies that its system allows letters to go astray. I have witnessed the loss of letters that I have sent to the CSA.

I have a constituent who is in dispute with the CSA over a lost application. The sin is that it is for the applicant to prove that the application was submitted. The CSA takes no responsibility for lost applications or correspondence. I have hard evidence that it is responsible for the lost correspondence. The benefit of the doubt in respect of lost letters should go to applicants.

I can recite a litany of events involving the CSA. I have witnessed grown men and women weeping at my advice sessions because they do not understand how the CSA works. I pointed out to the then Minister that one person had received a notice that within three months her maintenance assessment had been amended. How can people understand a system that operates in such a way?

A constituent of mine received a statement of arrears of maintenance payments, giving the date when payments were made. He checked it out and found from his receipts that the agency was demanding £400 more than he owed. That shows that some of his payments had not been recorded in its records. If he had not retained his receipts, he would have been charged £400 more than he owed. Such situations cannot be allowed to continue.

Another constituent was advised that the review of his assessment was due in November 1996. In a letter dated 19 August 1996, he was asked to submit wage slips and housing costs for June and July. He received an acknowledgment letter dated 28 August 1996 saying that his returns had been received. In February 1997, six months after submitting his earlier statement, he was asked for pay slips and housing costs for August and September 1996. The reassessment that should have taken place in November will not take place until the middle of 1997. His first evidence was accepted but the agency asked for further evidence. That can be interpreted only as a delaying tactic. How can that be allowed to happen? What credibility has the CSA when it takes such an approach?

A young mother was deserted by her husband, who left her with two young children. She applied to the CSA for help in February 1996. In July, it approached the absent parent for maintenance, a delay of six months. In the Adjournment debate, the Minister accepted that the CSA was guilty of maladministration. That case is before the independent case examiner. The young mother is still waiting for maintenance payments from the CSA.

A young couple parted and were divorced. The CSA became involved. The absent parent had £100 a week deducted from his earnings. Fortune brought the couple back together and they were remarried. The CSA was notified of the reconciliation. Nine months later, it is still deducting money from the husband's wages. A few weeks ago, it sent a cheque for £1,300 to the couple to cover what it had been retaining of the couple's money. It still owes them more than £1,000. When the couple asked for compensation for lost interest and the numerous telephone calls and approaches to the CSA to rectify the situation, it asked them to provide a statement of losses, telephone accounts and so on. In other words, it does not accept responsibility for the hardship and problems that it caused that young couple. That case was reported to me only last week. I could go on outlining the problems that I have witnessed and am witnessing because of the CSA, but many other hon. Members wish to speak.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred to absent parents being men. Some absent parents are women. I have a constituent who is being chased for maintenance by the CSA because of the fact that she cares for the son of the marriage and the father cares for the daughter of the marriage. The mother was harassed for payment to the father, but the father was given time to consider the position. The CSA did not approach him until six months after the application. He denied paternity and the case was delayed further. The mother cannot understand why, with two people in identical circumstances, the CSA is harassing her and appears to be taking a relaxed attitude to the other case. Again, how can people explain that kind of situation?

I have a constituent who retired. He was having deductions of maintenance paid through his bank. He notified the CSA of a change in his circumstances: that his income had reduced by 50 per cent., so a reassessment should take place. Six months later, that

[Mr. O'Brien]

person is still asking the CSA to take note of his changed circumstances. It is still deducting from his bank account the full amount, as if he were receiving a full income.

Therefore, in my experience and, I am sure, in other people's experience, the CSA is failing a substantial number of people. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State assures us that there will be a review. The best review that we could have would be to scrap the CSA and to bring back a fairer and more just system that is honest and understandable.

The document "a guide to child support maintenance" contains a number of examples. Page 14 gives a schedule of net incomes and what the CSA takes into consideration, but nowhere in the list is it suggested that, when an absent parent remarries, the income of the new partner should be taken into consideration when calculating income into the household. However, that is what the CSA is doing. When it asks for details of income into the household, it demands also wage payment identification of what the new partner is contributing, but nowhere in the document does it say that that should happen.

Therefore, in addition to the CSA harassing people and being unfair to them, it is interpreting what Parliament wanted with regard to a fair system of maintenance assessment. The CSA is a law unto itself. It is asking for details of the income of an absent parent's new wife or husband. That is totally against the principle that was introduced when the CSA was brought about.

Therefore, from the experience that I have, I say to my good friend the Secretary of State: reconsider the position. The best way in which to do that is to scrap the CSA and to bring back a better and fairer system, which the courts can apply, which is nearer to the people—not in Belfast, Falkirk or some other remote area—and which people understand. That would be the best way forward.

10.53 am

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien), who has a reputation as a doughty fighter. As he said, his last Adjournment debate took place at the end of the previous Parliament. I have taken the opportunity to refresh my mind on the content of and exchanges in that debate, which was valuable, as was the hon. Gentleman's speech this morning. I agree with his analysis. For some time now, we Liberal Democrats have been in the vanguard of the argument. We were led to the conclusion that the CSA's lack of operational success was such that it should be wound up and started again.

I thank the Secretary of State for Social Security for staging this debate. It was absolutely right that she should come to the House. It is five years since the legislation was put on the statute book. I confess that I was one of the people who was taken in at the time. I remember making speeches about benefit penalties for non-co-operative mothers—that is still a problem—but otherwise I did not foresee the difficulties and the extent to which this would cause dislocation and disruption throughout the nation.

The Secretary of State is brave and right to come before the House not with any great plans after a week and a half in office, saying this is what she is going to do and this is what she is not going to do, but to say that there are problems. In my opinion, she has made her position absolutely clear. I strongly support the view that there is no question but that the principle of continuing duty of maintenance is sacrosanct. She is right to put that at the heart of her policy. If she keeps it there, she will certainly find strong support from the Liberal Democrats, irrespective of any differences we and the Government may have as the argument unfolds and as her reforms and review continu

I acknowledge that it is not easy for the Secretary of State to open this subject in front of a new Parliament when she gets the kind of hard time that the hon. Member for Normanton, rightly, on behalf of his constituents, gave her. There is universal dissatisfaction with the operation of the system that the CSA was set up to achieve. It has not been working for five years; the House has a duty to attend to that. It is right that we should have this debate now. The Liberal Democrats will constructively and robustly argue for change where it is necessary.

There is a fundamental flaw at the heart of the legislation. It is not easy to know how to deal with it, but the concept of a formula is almost by definition unfair to the minority who do not fit the normal circumstances. There are always going to be people in life's rich tapestry who do not squeeze into the formula and there are always going to be casualties. What, more than anything else, encourages the disproportionately high level of non-compliance—we are a law-abiding nation at heart—is the fact that, in their heart of hearts, people do not believe that they have had justice; they think that no one has listened to their individual circumstances and they are incensed to the point of being driven into non-compliance. They are not naturally bad people or in any way untoward. They are perfectly ordinary citizens, but they do not believe that they have had a fair chance. They think that what has happened to them is contrary to natural justice so, for understandable reasons, they do not comply.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: As the whole taxation system is a based on the principle of a formula and the whole social security system, including means-tested benefits, is based on the principle of a formula, why is it not just, in this case, to have the principle of a formula? Much of life elsewhere is based on such a principle.

Mr. Kirkwood: The analogy does not hold. Taxation rarely, if ever, takes into account second marriages, second families and all the different circumstances that individuals face.

Mr. Lilley: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that it is right to have a tax system that does not take into account the complexities of life, but that it is wrong to have a formula that does, that it is right to have a tax system that does not take into account the fact that people may have responsibilities—responsibility does not even enter the calculation of people's tax—but that it is wrong to have a formula that does take into account such responsibilities?

Mr. Kirkwood: There is some rough justice under the tax system, but I do not want to get too far into that argument.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): May I help the hon. Gentleman? The previous Government were unable to come up with a formula and, in the Adjournment debate on the CSA on the final day of the

previous Parliament, the Minister proudly said that, since he had become a Minister—that was not a very long time in my recollection—he had made 140 changes to the way in which the CSA operated. Clearly the Conservatives have not been able to come up with a formula, so they should not be criticising the hon. Member.

Mr. Kirkwood: Not only were there 140 amendments; there were 35 statutory instruments in three years. I simply cannot agree with the proposition that that gives anybody a sense of security and of a system working properly and fairly. In fact, all those changes in the last Parliament exacerbated the delays. The target time for clearing cases has improved, but not enough.

It being Eleven o'clock, MADAM SPEAKER *interrupted the proceedings, pursuant to Standing Order No. 11 (Friday sittings).*

Health Services (London)

11 am

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): With permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the future of health services in London.

Under the previous Government, there was growing concern about the health service in the capital. Londoners were especially concerned about the programme of hospital closures, which had almost halved the number of acute beds, and also about the availability of accident, emergency and ambulance services and the lack of adequate primary care.

At the general election, we made it clear that we wanted to make sure that every Londoner had access to high-quality services ranging from primary care close to home, to major specialist services in teaching hospitals of world renown. We promised a moratorium on all hospital closures in London while the future of health care for Londoners was reassessed against what Londoners really need.

We are keeping that promise, and today I can announce details of our review of health care in London. Londoners are entitled to expect that the review is conducted by people of distinction, integrity and independence. I am therefore pleased to be able to announce that the review will be conducted by an independent advisory panel. The five members of the panel are Sir Leslie Turnberg, president of the Royal College of Physicians, who will chair the panel; Francine Bates, assistant director, Carers National Association; Professor Ian Cameron, provost and vice-chancellor of the University of Wales college of medicine; Professor Brian Jarman, professor of general practice at Imperial college; and Denise Platt, head of social services at the Local Government Association. I am most grateful to them all for taking on this task.

The panel will review health services in London based on available information and any further work that it decides to commission. It will review health authority plans, to ensure that people living in every part of London have ready access to top-quality primary care provided by general practitioner practices or in new centres offering a wide range of services; top-quality continuing care—including rehabilitation services—for elderly and infirm people, provided at home, in community care centres and in nursing and residential homes; top-quality mental health services, including care at home, in the community, in residential accommodation, in acute psychiatric wards or in a secure environment; services that benefit from improved co-ordination between the national health service and local social services; accident, emergency and ambulance services capable of meeting foreseeable needs; local hospitals, whether providing a full range of out-patient and in-patient services or mainly day care, minor injuries and diagnostic/out-patient services; and major specialist hospitals providing excellence in treatment and care and in teaching and clinical and scientific research.

All that is in line with the Government's vision of a range of top-quality services for all Londoners. The panel will ensure the coherence of plans by health authorities and trusts, including plans for capital investment. The panel will advise, in particular, on the future of Bart's hospital, Queen Mary's' Roehampton and Harold Wood

[Mr. Frank Dobson]

and Oldchurch hospitals. The review will also take account of the new impetus that the Government are giving to improving public health through better health promotion and prevention.

The panel will report to the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn). It has been asked to report by the end of October this year. Its advice will be published, and the material that it considers while carrying out its review will be made available to people who want to see it. Individuals or groups who wish to submit written evidence to the panel are invited to do so. Any meetings or presentations will be at the invitation of the panel. In parallel with that, my hon. Friend will be visiting London health service organisations and meeting various stakeholders.

In line with our election promise, no hospital in London will be closed during the period of the review. Agreed service changes that do not involve hospital closures will continue, as will planning and consultation procedures, but any future changes at present being considered will be reviewed by the independent advisory panel.

In law, the panel cannot make binding decisions on the future of individual hospitals, but all such decisions in future will have to be taken in the light of the published recommendations of the independent advisory panel.

The arrangements that I have outlined meet our manifesto commitment to the people of London. I am confident that they will result in a real review, by an independent panel of great experience and integrity. I hope that the panel's recommendations will command the respect of all concerned.

I commend the proposal to the House.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman is now making the position clear on the election pledge to a health review in London. Why has he chosen to announce the review on a Friday, when most hon. Members are in their constituencies? Is not it completely absurd for a statement of such significance to be made on a day when the great majority of hon. Members have planned to be away from the House, looking after the affairs of their constituents? Is it because the right hon. Gentleman recognises that it is yet another review of London's health care which, frankly, is the very last thing that the national health service in London needs?

The truth is that the right hon. Gentleman recognises that this is a cheap election gimmick that is best put out of its misery as quickly as possible. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman is likely to be put out of his misery pretty quickly. How is it possible to take seriously a review that will follow the Tomlinson process, which took four years, carried out a detailed examination, by specialty, of the health care provision in each hospital across London and conducted a detailed review of the implications of service provision for research, medical education and the development of primary health care? How is it possible for all of that now to be dispatched in four months, including holidays? It simply is not credible. It is the thinnest veneer that the House has been presented with in a very long time.

How can we take seriously a review that the right hon. Gentleman said only last month, from the Dispatch Box, would be charged with looking at the same evidence that Tomlinson looked at, applying the same disciplines that Tomlinson applied, yet would be debarred from reaching the same conclusion as that independent review? How independent is a review that is told that it cannot reach a specific conclusion which was the considered conclusion of the previous review?

Is not the true purpose of the review revealed in the list of hospitals that the right hon. Gentleman announced in his statement? He promised that there would be a particular review of Bart's, Queen Mary's' Roehampton and Harold Wood and Oldchurch hospitals. The House may wonder what those hospitals have in common—it is the fact that they have been the subject of public excitement by Labour Members. The House will notice that absent from the list is Edgware hospital, yet during the general election campaign, the Labour shadow Secretary of State for Health gave a specific commitment to a review of the service changes planned for that hospital. Why are the Government now reneging on that specific commitment?

Why are the major changes for Guy's and St. Thomas's—which will be of concern to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), the Liberal Democrat health spokesman—not the specific subject of review by the panel? What will be the major changes? What will be the panel's specific role in the current reorganisation of London's medical schools? Does the Secretary of State envisage proposals being made to alter the current process of change in those schools?

If the panel is to focus on issues of particular public concern, will it focus on the reorganisation of accident and emergency provision in London, which has been under way for several years? The right hon. Gentleman will be aware of the Audit Commission report that recommended that accident and emergency provision should be concentrated in departments with more than 50,000 attendances a year. Do Ministers agree with that recommendation, or do they have a different view? Will the panel examine that recommendation, and will it make recommendations on future accident and emergency provision in London?

What assumptions will the panel be told to make about resources for London's NHS? Is the Secretary of State aware of long-standing evidence of the imbalance in available resources between inner London's health service and the health service on the London ring? Are Ministers committed to continue correcting that imbalance, or will they explain to communities on the London ring that resources available for their health care will continue to be less generous than those available in inner London?

What assumptions will the panel make about charges for NHS services in London? What assumptions will it make about charges for general practitioner services, and what assumptions will it make about charges for hospital services? Does the Secretary of State think that charges within the NHS will be a means of squaring the circle of all the commitments that he has made?

The truth is that the review fools absolutely no one, and it will merely delay until the autumn the day on which the Secretary of State will have to make real decisions about the future shape of London's health service. He will

then not be able to prevaricate any longer. He will have to earn his salary and start making the decisions that are his and his alone to make.

Mr. Dobson: That was a regular rigamarole of insults against a very distinguished group of people—who, at my request, have undertaken to conduct an independent review of health services in London. They believe that the task can be accomplished under the tight timetable that we have established. We have discussed with panel members their terms of reference, their method of working and the timetable under which they will operate. They will do their best, and I do not think that the former Secretary of State's string of insults will accomplish anything.

The former Secretary of State said that we have made the announcement today because all hon. Members are in their far-flung constituencies. The announcement is about London, however, and there are very few far-flung constituencies in London. Moreover, a substantial number of my hon. Friends representing London constituencies are in the Chamber. He may call the announcement a "cheap election gimmick", but we call it keeping our promises. We will keep all our election promises.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): What about Edgware?

Mr. Dobson: The former Secretary of State referred to the Tomlinson report. All I can say is that I want a report that commands if not the approval, at least the respect of everyone concerned. That certainly cannot be said of the Tomlinson report, which was ripped to shreds by Professor Jarman, who is a member of our independent panel.

The reason why I listed specifically four hospitals is that they are currently directly threatened with closure because of the activities of the right hon. Gentleman and his predecessors. It is therefore necessary to review specifically those hospitals, although all other hospital closures and proposals for change will be covered in the review.

Mr. Clappison: What about Edgware?

Mr. Dobson: The former Secretary of State asked me to give a specific commitment about medical schools. I can tell him—

Mr. Clappison: What about Edgware?

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Dobson: Apparently someone wants to get somewhere on the Northern line. The hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) would be able to get there quicker if the previous Conservative Government had not prevented ABB getting the new rolling stock rolling.

The former Secretary of State asked me about the review of medical schools. Under the panel's terms of reference, it will advise on how best to maintain the pre-eminent role of medical education and research in the capital. He also asked about A and E departments. It may be that all types of official bodies have said that they are satisfied with provision of accident, emergency and ambulance services in London. From the experiences that I and my hon. Friends have had over the years in talking to people, however, we know that there is a great deal of concern among Londoners about the adequacy of accident, emergency and ambulance services. We therefore want our independent panel to review the proposals.

I have dealt with all the sensible points made by the former Secretary of State—so far as he made any sensible points. We have established a highly reputable, widely respected and independent advisory panel that will review the future of health care in London, from the point of view of Londoners who need those services. If he is not satisfied with that, I am sorry for him.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): The House will recall the notice in a maternity hospital ward that said, "The first three minutes of your life can be the most dangerous," under which someone had written, "And the last three can be pretty dodgy, too." In that context, four months in the history of a hospital that is nearly 900 years old are but a hiccup in history. I welcome what the Secretary of State has just said.

Given that, in the past 20 years, the resource allocation working party formula—which was introduced under the Labour party and sustained by the Conservative party—has been responsible for the movement of considerable NHS resources out of London, will the Secretary of State tell us—at a time when anything is thinkable in the NHS—that he will not rule out extra resources, should the panel determine that they are necessary?

Mr. Dobson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his characteristically generous welcome for what I said. As we have made clear, we are conducting a comprehensive spending review of every aspect of the activities of the NHS. I can make no promises before the outcome of that review, although I realise that, over the years, there have been significant pressures on London. As the right hon. Gentleman said, those pressures are the result, over a long period, of the policies of successive Governments.

Mr. Brian Sedgemore (Hackney, South and Shoreditch): I warmly congratulate the Secretary of State on today's statement and applaud the fact that he has assembled a first-class review panel, which will command the confidence not only of the House but of Londoners and of people in the rest of the country. Will he arrange for a copy of his statement to be sent to Colonel Boorman, the chairman of the Royal Hospitals NHS trust—because that man, white with rage, has pledged himself to close Bart's, regardless of what civil servants, Ministers and perhaps even the review panel may wish to do?

Mr. Dobson: I thank my hon. Friend who, like the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), has campaigned long and hard to save Bart's. I undertake to carry out his request to send my statement to all those concerned.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement—unlike his predecessor but one, who made hers in writing. I also congratulate him on his choice of panel members. I share the views expressed that they are

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

an entirely suitable group. The timetable envisaged is properly balanced between a need for deliberation and a need for speed.

I have three specific questions. First, does the Secretary of State's statement mean that all the undertakings given by his predecessor as Labour health spokesman, on what will be reviewable, will be honoured? Secondly, in places such as Edgware and Barnet, will he undertake that, between now and consideration of the review by Ministers later in the year, there will be no further reductions in beds or services? Thirdly—inevitably, this point has a constituency dimension, but it is also of much wider interest—will he confirm that the panel will have the authority to review the transfer of services from Guy's hospital, which would mean a reduction in the number of beds from about 1,000 to about 100 and the closure of the A and E department? Will all transfers not yet acted on but which are part of a plan be capable of review and a different decision?

Mr. Dobson: I should make it clear that our promise at the election was that there would be no further hospital closures in London, and no hospital closures will take place during the period of the review. We did not promise to stop all change in London, some of which is having to be carried out on the advice of the professions, which say that, in certain circumstances, the services being provided in some hospitals are not safe for patients. Everyone will understand that I would not wish to overrule the professional judgment of doctors who believe that a particular unit is no longer capable of delivering the service to which people are entitled. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have already set in train a special review of provision in Edgware, and we can deal with that at greater length at some other time.

I cannot give the undertaking that there will not be continuing transfers of functions between one hospital and another. Everyone knows that there is no proposal to close either Guy's or St Thomas's. The intention is to make sure that each particular specialty is concentrated in one hospital or the other, which is only right. There is a swap mechanism in operation—St Thomas's is getting some of the stuff from Guy's and Guy's is getting some of the stuff from St. Thomas's. Again, I am not prepared to say that I shall interfere with that process if it is generally judged that it will bring about the larger specialist units on which top-quality specialist treatment and research depend.

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and welcome the review, especially its concentration on Queen Mary's university hospital, Roehampton. That hospital had many of its services cruelly taken away by the previous Government on 1 April and has suffered review after review over many years. The people of Putney and Roehampton and the long-suffering nurses and doctors of the hospital need to have some certainty about their future. Last month, a quite separate review was announced by the region of the services between Kingston hospital and Queen Mary's university hospital. May I have an assurance that the review announced today will supersede that review, so that the doctors, nurses and patients of the hospital and residents of the area do not face yet more uncertainty?

Mr. Dobson: The object of having the advisory panel is to try to sort out many contentious issues and get advice from professional people of great integrity. There is a vast amount of uncertainty about the future of Queen Mary's, Roehampton and other hospitals round about. We want the panel to clarify the situation, but I cannot predict what it will say, because one cannot tell people of this eminence what their conclusions will be. The whole point of having such people is that they are entitled to make their own professional judgment.

Some statutory procedures for consultation in the area covered by Queen Mary's university hospital, Roehampton and associated hospitals will continue during the review, but the consultation process itself will be reviewed by the advisory panel. We cannot simply announce a stop on everything, because that would mean delays in some changes that are vital to improve the quality of health care in London.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Will the right hon. Gentleman assure the House that neither he nor any of his Government colleagues made any effort to give better notice of his statement to Labour Members than to London Conservative Members?

Mr. Dobson: Yes, I can give that undertaking. We warned as many Members from all parties as it was humanly possible to do. That is not a task for civil servants, so it was carried out by my political adviser and one of my parliamentary colleagues. We did not get through to quite all Labour colleagues nor to all Conservative Members, but we certainly got through to some.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement, especially in respect of the team of people who are to undertake the review. Will the review include issues such as poverty in London and the way in which calculations of expenditure for each district health authority are made? It is my impression that such calculations often do not take account of the number of transient and homeless people or, indeed, the travel-to-work people in particular districts, which means that expenditure on health is underestimated in those areas. Will the team be able to make recommendations on the future government of London and the role that it would have in health planning and its relationship with local government?

Finally, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the examination of the future of Bart's hospital will include consideration of new A and E provision? At the moment, there are intolerable waits at all neighbouring A and E departments because of the closure of the A and E department at Bart's last year.

Mr. Dobson: As usual, my hon. Friend makes a number of informed and valid points. The panel will certainly be considering provision in London in the light of the Government's commitment to improve public health, not just through the health service but through a wide variety of measures, including the building of decent homes.

As for the role or otherwise of a Greater London authority, that is something that is still being discussed. As my hon. Friend knows, I have some sympathy with the proposition, although it may not eventually be Government policy—I am talking about all sorts of things, which may not ultimately be Government policy.

My hon. Friend asked about the restoration of previous A and E services at Bart's. Nothing is outside the terms of reference of the panel, but I should not like to raise any false hopes or, for that matter, any false despair about the changes proposed at Bart's.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I hope that the review will include consideration of co-ordination between social services and health services. The present lack of co-ordination means that many people are left vulnerable and unable to get decent services. As a first step, will the Secretary of State tell the House that he will honour a commitment made by the right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith) that social services committee members will be appointed to the boards of NHS trusts and health authorities in London, so that co-ordination can be improved now?

Mr. Dobson: I mentioned the improved co-ordination between national health service and social services departments, and where it is good in various parts of London, it is very, very good, and where it is bad it is horrid. We have to bring the rest up to the standard of the best. As to how we bring that about, regardless of the membership of trusts or health authorities and cross-membership, the crucial thing is to get the officials working together. People at member level may have a role, but they are not the ones who can turn good intentions into good organisation—that needs top-quality management, both in the national health service and in local authorities.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. His comments about Oldchurch will be received with great delight by many east London residents, particularly my constituents in Ilford, who would suffer grievously from the closure of the accident and emergency department at Oldchurch and the consequences that that would have for King George hospital, which is already at bursting point and suffering an intolerable crisis.

I also welcome the review of mental health services. Will the review give urgent consideration to the future reprovisioning of Goodmayes mental hospital and the financial consequences of its planned closure? I had a meeting yesterday with my local health authority. I am alarmed about the long-term prospects. If the issue is not dealt with adequately, there will be disastrous consequences for the provision of many services, with budgetary repercussions, in Redbridge and Waltham Forest.

Mr. Dobson: I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome for my announcement. The review panel will consider Oldchurch and the future of mental health services in London. We must await the outcome of those deliberations.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I have three points for the Secretary of State. First, I thank him for at least managing to come to the House to make a statement. Is he not a little concerned that the fact that he has done so on a Friday, when not many hon. Members are here, will inevitably give rise to the suggestion that he has tried to make the statement at a time when he will not be subjected to questions? In view of what he has said about his courteous efforts to inform hon. Members of the statement, will he undertake to discover whether my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) was informed, because he has been concerned for a long time about Barnet and Edgware hospitals?

Secondly, will the Secretary of State ensure that the distinguished members of the inquiry are given access to the evidence and conclusions of the Tomlinson report, the King's Fund report and the many other reports that have been conducted by similarly distinguished people over many years?

Finally, will the right hon. Gentleman tell the people of Edgware and Barnet why Edgware general hospital is not included in the review? Did he make any effort to tell the people of Edgware about that before the general election? He will be aware of the strength of feeling on the subject in Edgware and the way in which his party has handled the issues. Why is Edgware not part of the review?

Mr. Dobson: I do not know whom my staff and my colleague managed to get through to in their efforts to ring all London Members last night, but they certainly made that effort. Before I apologise further for any shortcomings, it is worth reminding the hon. Gentleman that when the last but one Secretary of State for Health made major announcements, including her endorsement of the closure of Bart's hospital, which had been providing a service to Londoners for 821 years, she did not manage to come to the House on any day, but slipped the information out in answer to a written question from one of her mates.

I spelled out in my statement that the panel will have access to all the available information. The Tomlinson report will certainly be familiar to Professor Jarman, because he tore it to shreds when it was published—and quite right, too.

The hon. Gentleman ought to know—perhaps he does not—that a special review of provision in Edgware and Barnet has already been set in train. There is no proposal to close Edgware general hospital—not even the previous Government made that proposal. We are not accepting any criticism about the future of Edgware hospital from those who were running it down, closing the accident and emergency department as secretly as they could in the middle of the night. None of my colleagues was involved in that.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I warmly welcome the appointment of the eminent review panel and the fact that it will focus on Bart's hospital, which provides a high standard of cardiac treatment, benefiting a number of my constituents. Will the review panel also consider the debt problem, which is crippling health authorities across London, affecting hospitals such as mine at Whipps Cross? Those huge debts have built up because of the cuts imposed by 18 years of the Conservative Government and their internal market.

[Mr. Harry Cohen]

Will the review examine the weighted capitation, which does not take proper account of deprivation and hurts hospitals in east London?

Mr. Dobson: The panel will certainly consider those points. Debt is not exclusive to London health authorities and trusts. Of the 100 health authorities in England, 59 were in debt at the end of the year, as were 128 of the 425 trusts across the country. That was part of the wondrous legacy that we inherited from the Conservatives.

Mr. Thomas Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I, too, welcome the statement. I should like to make the House aware of the meeting that I had with representatives of Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth. They revealed that they are £14 million in the red and are cutting back on elective surgery, with waiting lists going up from 12 months to 18 months. I do not want to pre-empt the panel's findings, but I think that it will inevitably find that the authority cannot ensure top-quality care. What will the Government do to ensure that the accident and emergency unit at St. Helier hospital does not have to close its doors to patients and ambulances this winter, as has happened in the past two or three years under the previous Government?

Mr. Dobson: I shall try to confine my answer to the newest point raised by the hon. Gentleman. We have already made arrangements for contingency planning, for the pressures that are bound to fall on the health service this winter. I was glad to be able to announce that we have found £5 million from the money saved on bureaucracy to help improve children's intensive care provision, which should help during the winter.

Madam Speaker: Order. I know that hon. Members are tempted, but some are going wide of the narrow statement, which concerns only the named hospitals. I remind hon. Members that we are concerned with only the hospitals named.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): In welcoming the review into the longer term, may I ask the Secretary of State to give some assurances about the short-term situation this winter? In Mayday University hospital in Croydon and throughout London, too many patients waited for hospital beds last winter, lying in pain and distress on trolleys for hours and hours, sometimes throughout the night. The longer term is important, but what reassurances can the Secretary of State give to Londoners that his Department is doing its utmost to ensure bed provision this winter?

Mr. Dobson: I assure my hon. Friend that we are doing what we can. As I have just said, we have put in place contingency planning to identify places where problems may arise and to ensure targeted management action by the national health service, social services and, in some cases, voluntary organisations, to try to clear bottlenecks that result from older people who would be better off at home having to stay in hospital and therefore preventing other people from getting treatment. We are doing our best. It will be difficult, and success will depend largely on the management skills and commitment of the vast number of medical and nursing staff in hospitals.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): I welcome the review and reiterate the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes). The review will be welcomed across Hornchurch, Havering and east London, where the potential closure of Oldchurch hospital is a source of great concern. The private finance initiative contracts for the Havering Hospitals NHS trust, which covers Harold Wood and Oldchurch, are already with the trust. A decision is due at the end of July. Could we have a moratorium on the PFI contracts as well, so that we can put the issue to one side while the review continues?

Mr. Dobson: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that whatever the state of the PFI, it will be reviewed by the panel.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for making his statement to the House this morning. The clarification that he has given will be welcomed throughout London. More than that, the commitment to health care needs in London will be welcomed. I am also grateful to my right hon. Friend for the interest and concern that he has shown in discussions with me about the hospitals serving my constituency. I take this opportunity to ask whether he can clarify the relationship between the Londonwide review and the separate review of Edgware hospital, which his Department announced on 15 May this year.

Mr. Dobson: The review that is at present being carried out by Barnet health authority will report to the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington. Its report will be made available to the review panel and will, therefore, be part of the panel's general look at health services in London.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Further to the Secretary of State's answer to the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn), will he extend the terms of reference of the review to include the future strategic management of health across London? In Kingston, we felt the knock-on effects on our hospital services of decisions taken elsewhere in London, and they have made the management of services in our local area very difficult. There was no strategic direction. We should be grateful if the Secretary of State extended the terms of reference of the review.

Mr. Dobson: Having got this distinguished panel to look at the terms of reference and having agreed the terms with the panel members, I cannot unilaterally change them now. I would imagine, however, that if the panel members believe that the strategic aspects need further attention, based on their professional knowledge and concern, they will draw our attention to what they think should be done.

Ms Judith Church (Dagenham): I join my hon. Friends the Members for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) and for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) in very much welcoming the review. My constituents in Dagenham are desperately concerned about the future of Oldchurch hospital. The Secretary of State will know that currently, the emergency

services unit at Harold Wood is closed and that Oldchurch is dealing with the whole population. I hope that the Secretary of State will join me in congratulating the staff there on the job that they are doing in a quite desperate situation. From visits I have paid in the past few months, I know that the situation is a nightmare for patients and for staff, who have kept the service going as well as they can.

Will my right hon. Friend ensure that when the eminent panel—I congratulate him on getting its services so quickly and on enabling the report to be done so soon—reviews the services at Oldchurch and Harold Wood, it considers the needs of the population and the density of the population, with hospital provision being near the areas where the largest number of sick people are? The proposals in the pipeline mean that the largest number of sick people would have to travel the greatest distances to get emergency services.

Mr. Dobson: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that the intention is that the panel should start from the point of considering what people need in every part of London and that it should take it from there, rather than starting from the institutions and working back.

Mr. Dorrell: Will the Secretary of State clarify one point that has come up this morning in questions from several hon. Members—that is, the extent to which the panel will be able to review the weighted capitation formula and the flow of funds both within London's health service and between London and the surrounding districts? Will it be within the terms of reference of the review to make recommendations for changes to the weighted capitation formula? If it is, can the Secretary of State assure the House that any recommendation would take account of interests outside London, which would clearly be affected if the weighted capitation formula were to be changed?

Mr. Dobson: The panel will look at every aspect that has an impact on health provision in London; that is what we want it to do. If the panel concludes that changes are necessary, it will no doubt recommend them. On the point about the impact of the financing of provision in London on other areas, it is worth remembering that London also provides considerable services to people from other areas. There is a matter of striking a balance.

At the end of all this process, when the independent panel has given its views on all those matters, Ministers will have to take decisions, and we shall not shirk from taking them. As I said in my statement, all those decisions will have to be taken in the light of the public recommendations of this distinguished, independent panel. That will be a change and a step forward for the national health service.

Mr. Corbyn: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It has been a welcome departure that the Secretary of State attempted to inform as many hon. Members as possible that today's statement was coming up. Can you confirm that under the previous Administration, Opposition Members were never informed in advance of statements?

Madam Speaker: I am not aware of how hon. Members are informed about statements. I am just concerned that they are informed and that I am told in good time myself.

Child Support Agency

Question again proposed, That this House do now adjourn.

11.45 am

Mr. Kirkwood: I had just made the point that I was deeply sceptical about the rightness of a formula-based approach to assessments by the CSA. I believe that Ministers have to be careful because they are initiating a review that may lead to changes. I believe that they are initiating that review in good faith, and I support their intention, but they must learn the lessons of the previous Parliament.

Some welcome changes were made. The previous hon. Member for Gedling and particularly the former hon. Member for Bury, North listened to hon. Members and introduced some welcome changes on departures, travel to work and pre-1993 property settlements. They made the changes in good faith, but the result was that the procedures became more cumbersome and complex and the delays increased. Delays are now a real part of the problem.

Can the Minister confirm that it is still the CSA's intention to try to clear the backlog between now and 1999, which was the previous target? That is a long time away. I understand the Secretary of State's impatience to try to get the assessment times down to six months. Six months is an inordinate period for people who are in distressed family and domestic circumstances. The target time for clearing cases must be made shorter.

I come from an area where there are many self-employed people. Self-employed assessments are fiendishly complicated and time-consuming, and something must be done about that. People become incensed when they do not know what is happening, when they do not get the payments and when enforcement procedures are not complied with.

If the Government introduce changes, they may increase the complexity, and they will have to introduce those changes against the background of the existing programme for change. As is the case with other financial constraints, this Government have inherited that programme. There was a 15 per cent. reduction in resources for the CSA last year, there is a 15 per cent. reduction this year and there will be a 15 per cent. reduction in staff resources next year.

I agreed with the Secretary of State when she said that the staff who work for the CSA deserve Orders of the British Empire. I hope that they all get them in the post tomorrow because they do their best in impossible circumstances. I do not see how Ministers will square the circle of increasing complexity and the reductions required by the existing programme. Any changes will have to take those factors into account. We must go for simplicity and Ministers will have to be very careful about the conflicting interests involved.

Will the Minister undertake a piece of research? Previous and present Ministers have said—this is not new—that the old family court system had been discredited. A very good research study by Jonathan Bradshaw and Jane Millar was published at the back of the 1990 White Paper, "Children Come First". Bradshaw and Millar examined the levels of assessment being allotted by family courts and sheriff courts throughout the United Kingdom.

[Mr. Kirkwood]

I should like the Secretary of State to look at that research and, perhaps, to carry out some more. Never mind the interim assessment, never mind the arrears—some of the arrears are horrendous—let us look at the weekly maintenance awards that are being made for the average case. If the value of the maintenance awards that were being made by the courts in 1988 is uprated to where we are today, there is not an awful lot of difference. If the Secretary of State can persuade me that I am wrong about that, I shall pay attention.

I was a solicitor before I was elected to the House. I did family law, and it was very difficult. What really failed was the enforcement mechanism. The Secretary of State can stay true to her clear principle, which she set out clearly this morning—that a continuing duty of maintenance is crucial—while the enforcement procedures are followed through more rigorously. If the Child Support Agency was focused on enforcement and there was some other mechanism for determining awards, we would have a fairer and better operated system.

I was reassured by the Secretary of State's undertaking that she will consider carefully a small maintenance disregard. She is right; the Labour party document was not wrong when it said that the increased income support that that might generate could pay for it. We should look at that as quickly and as urgently as we can.

I am also very worried about the benefit penalty, which was doubled in the previous Parliament. The benefit penalty for women on benefit who do not co-operate, particularly those on income support, is now nearly £20 a week, which is deducted from basic benefit for three years. Why are women on benefit refusing to co-operate? More important, what on earth is happening to the families—and the children in those families—who are suffering that deduction?

The Secretary of State is right to say that getting help to the poorest children is one of her objectives, but she must look at the penalty again as a matter of urgency, because it is unconscionable. We are all concerned about fraud, but somehow the two things became entwined, and people thought that a bit of fraud was going on and that there was collusion. Perhaps there is fraud, but bona fide mothers on income support are paying a very high price—a £20 per week deduction year on year. The Government must look at that.

The standard margin element of basic protected income was set at £30 in 1994. It should be uprated. That would not cost a lot of money. If it remains at £30 for ever, injustice will be put into the system. I would like it to be considered for annual uprating, or at least occasional uprating.

I was astonished at the complacency of the last Social Security Committee report, which said that the CSA's service had improved. The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) and the Minister for Welfare Reform are not present. I agree with the hon. Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien), who said that it has not improved much at all. Some of the performance figures suggest that there are improvements, but I would like the customer satisfaction service to be increased. I would also like the customer satisfaction service to be extended to deal with second family disruption, because that is one of the major problems.

I welcome the creation of an independent case review officer. I hope that she is not expecting to do much in her spare time. She will be very busy. I hope that some of her work and her conclusions might be made available to hon. Members, through either the Library or some other means of publication. The previous Government ran away from some of the worst excesses and difficulties. The message that I get strongly from the Secretary of State—I welcome it—is that she will not run away from the problems. If she is prepared to take them on the chin and share them with us, we will have a better chance collectively of resolving them.

I end where I started. The CSA is not fair enough. It is not efficient. It is not effective. Until those three points are put right, we on the Liberal Democrat Benches will cleave to the view that it should be abolished in the meantime.

11.54 am

Mr. Paul Stinchcombe (Wellingborough): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make the first maiden speech by a Member of Parliament for Wellingborough for 28 years and the first by a Labour Member since 24 November 1964, when I was just two years old.

In view of the time that has passed since hon. Members were treated to a tour of Wellingborough, and in conformity with convention, I will describe it to the House. The constituency of Wellingborough lies in the county of Northamptonshire and is a constituency of many parts. It is part urban and part rural. It is also proudly multicultural. It is proud of its strong Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities. The principal towns are Wellingborough, Rushden and the historic Higham Ferrers, which featured in the Domesday book. Smaller surrounding villages include Earls Barton, with a church tower more than 1,000 years old, and Wollaston which has more than 80 small businesses within its village confines, including a thriving example of a caring business—Scott Bader—employing 300 people, but run as a commonwealth. They also include the village of Irchester, with its Roman origins.

The local economy is diverse, based on farming and industry, the major industry being boots and shoes. The constituency still boasts 60 businesses involved in footwear manufacturing and employing more than 3,000 workers, which is more than 8 per cent. of the working population in the constituency. I can tell this honourable House that it was in great comfort that I walked the many miles of my campaign.

Although the seat of Wellingborough had been Conservative since the by-election which followed Harry Howarth's sad death in 1969, it was historically what it is today—a Labour constituency. We first won the seat through W. R. Smith in 1918—barely a decade after the party was founded. We won again in 1924, with Mr. Cove. In 1929, we won with George Dallas. In 1945, 1950, 1951 and 1955, we won with George Lindgren, who was privileged to make his maiden speech from the Front Bench, winding up the very first parliamentary debate in which he had engaged. In 1964 and 1966, we won with Harry Howarth, a man still fondly remembered both by many of my constituents and by hon. Members whose political longevity stretches that far.

The by-election that followed Harry's early death in 1969 was won by my immediate predecessor, Sir Peter Fry, who went on to hold the seat for 28 years.

Throughout his time in the House, Sir Peter served the constituency of Wellingborough as a hard-working and courageous Back Bencher, earning a reputation as a good constituency Member of Parliament, a reputation that I encountered during the campaign, and again last week, when I was invited to visit a wonderful woman in my constituency who was 106 years old and had particularly asked to meet her Member of Parliament. When I arrived, the look of disappointment was manifest and she said, "You are not that nice Sir Peter Fry; I always voted for him." I wish Sir Peter well in his retirement. I hope that he now has time to enjoy his family and his many outside interests.

Having been in Tory hands for 28 years, on May day 1997 the Labour party reclaimed the seat of Wellingborough in a political tidal wave of support which swept away five out of six Tory Members in Northamptonshire alone. We did not win on 1 May because the electorate wanted change; we won not because of scepticism or despair but because of hope and vision. People were inspired by the values that the Labour party put before them—that although as individuals we are different, we are in a deep sense equal. We have equal rights to both justice and social justice—to security, a home, health care, education and opportunity. Those are the rights which make us free. But they are matched by responsibilities to others so that they, too, may be free—because we are indeed our brother's keeper, because we shall not pass by on the other side and because working together, rather than as individuals alone, we can all achieve more.

Those are the values that have always inspired the Labour party, even if today they find their modern expression in policies fit to meet the problems of the new age in which we live. They are values that burn in my soul as fiercely as they burned in the souls of those previous Labour Members for Wellingborough—men whose minds were not fixed on self and place, men who did not cringe before the rich man's frown, men who fought in this House and the constituency for human rights and human gain, men who joined the Labour party, as did I, not to put a ceiling on the aspirations of those without hope but to remove it.

Our values recognise that both liberty and equality are essential preconditions to civilised society. Although those preconditions are sometimes in tension, both must inform the policies of a Government who govern for the many and not for the few, and who recognise that enterprise, talent and efficiency are not the enemies of compassion but its friends. In that way, everyone has an opportunity to succeed and this nation can call on the talent and enterprise of all our people, not just the privileged few. Using the talents and enterprise of all our people, we can build an economy based on sustainable growth and not on unsustainable greed. Through that sustainable growth, our compassion may be more bountifully delivered to those in need. We can then apply the efficiency of business to the delivery of that compassion.

These are Labour's historic values. We must bring them to bear on the Child Support Agency now that we are in government, because in many important ways and for very many people the way in which the CSA operates is inseparable from the objectives that we pursue, as enshrined in the values that I have described. Our values must find a practical expression in measures which make a difference. We cannot govern by values alone. While the Government have a large scope for making this country more like it should be, that scope is limited in many important respects.

Ultimately, strong nations, economies and communities are not built by new legislation or Parliaments alone; they are built by the people, even if Parliament sets the framework to achieve those ends. If we are to rebuild this nation, we must do so not just in Parliament but in our homes and families, which is where prime responsibility for our national destiny lies. Our children are our future: they depend on their families and homes first and the Government second. How our children are brought up, supported, encouraged and inculcated with values so that they care for their fellow men and women rather than just for themselves is crucial to our shared future and prosperity.

The Government must recognise that we have less power to strengthen families than to mandate change in other areas. However, we must also recognise the power that we have—first, because by virtue of its limited nature it is important to identify what we can do, and secondly because the field of human endeavour in which that power can be brought to bear is so sensitive and important that we must exercise our power wisely.

We can and must act to take some of the stresses out of modern family life. We can play a small part in keeping families together by tackling unemployment, poverty pay, excessive working hours and bad housing. We can and must act fairly and responsibly—never judgmentally—if and when families break up or do not come together in the traditional model. After all, single-parent families are families none the less and they need special support and care if children and parents are to be given the equal opportunity to succeed that they deserve.

That is why the Labour Government now seek to address the dependency culture and the poverty traps inherent in the existing tax and benefits system, giving single mothers a better chance to return to work. It is also why we must reform the operation of the CSA so that it performs as it should and not as it has. Few, if any, hon. Members would question the essential premise on which the CSA was founded—that a parent is for life, even if the family breaks up. With rights come responsibilities, and the greatest of those are the responsibilities of parents to their children.

Given that the founding principle behind the CSA commands wide support—while acknowledging the bitterness and sensitivities that family break-ups can cause—something must be going badly wrong if the CSA none the less generates such hostility. To be honest, I had not expected to make my maiden speech in this debate; the fact that I am doing so is due to my constituency. The overwhelming bulk of complaints in my postbag and surgeries have concerned the CSA, and it is clear from what my constituents have told me that the CSA has failed comprehensively to command public confidence.

I would speculate that there are two reasons for that which stand above all others. First, the CSA has taken the path of expediency in pursuing soft targets first, rather than focusing its attention on cases of real need. That means that many who are already making payments according to agreements are being pursued for larger payments while others in my constituency and elsewhere have yet to receive a penny and do not believe that the

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CSA is working for them. Those people are often in cash-flow crises. We cannot get young mums back to work if they are not receiving the maintenance money to which they are entitled and which would enable them to pay for child care.

Secondly, the CSA has turned into a bureaucratic nightmare from which it has not escaped. It is the fault not of the workers, but of the system. Delays are legion and mistakes common. One example from very many that I could give from my constituency concerns a happily married couple with a daughter. They awoke one day to find a letter from the CSA asserting that the husband had fathered a child by another woman some years ago. The husband denied it, but the wife was understandably traumatised—after all, such letters bear the imprint of authority—and left the marital home with her daughter.

Two weeks later, a further letter arrived from the CSA, saying that it had made a mistake. The man was not the father. The real father had a different name, address and date of birth. The rigorous system designed to prevent such errors had not been followed. The letter went on to make apologies and to moot the prospect of compensation, but incalculable damage, great unhappiness, hurt and trauma had already been caused. Trust had broken down in that marriage and in what had been a happy family, and it will take a long time to recover that trust—if, indeed, it is ever recovered.

The process of healing was not helped by a third letter from the CSA enclosing an insulting cheque for £100 in the hope that that would help with the hurt. It was not even sufficient to pay for a decent break so that the couple could try to talk through their problems. The letter went on in the same sentence to deny any liability on the part of the CSA.

That is just one sad tale. Taken alone, it would be cause for concern. Taken together with the many other examples of which I have heard in my surgeries and in the Chamber today, we can rightly see that there are profound problems which need to be addressed.

There are five reforms which I believe must be our first targets. First, we must work to make the CSA more efficient so that delays are cut and mistakes are fewer. Secondly, we must give parents an incentive to co-operate so that children are better protected from parental disputes. Thirdly, we must improve the independent appeals machinery so that the system is perceived to be fairer. Fourthly, we must tackle as priorities fraud in the system and evasion of the system, so that those in greatest need are helped properly and helped first. Fifthly, we must ensure that there is a proper enforcement mechanism which works expeditiously.

That is a clear path forward which is true to the ethos of the CSA but is designed to ensure that it regains the confidence of the public. Those in my constituency and the country who have been gravely affected by the CSA during its short lifetime will not settle for much less—nor should they have to. We were elected to make things better. Let us hope we can do just that.

12.7 pm

Professor Steve Webb (Northavon): I am grateful for the chance to make my maiden speech on an issue which, in my short time as a Member of Parliament, has proved to be one of considerable concern to my constituents. It is a privilege to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe), which was passionate, committed and well informed. Given the industries in his constituency, I was surprised that he did not regard his result as a shoe-in. I noted that one of his predecessors made a maiden speech from the Front Bench and, given the quality of the hon. Gentleman's speech, I am sure that it will not be long before he, too, is speaking from the Front Bench.

When I explain that I am the hon. Member for Northavon, the usual response is, "Where is that?" On the off-chance that any hon. Member present may be thinking the same thing, I will explain that my constituency occupies the north part of the South Gloucestershire unitary authority. It runs from the Severn bridge in the west to Badminton in the east, taking in on its way towns such as Thornbury, Bradley Stoke, Yate and Chipping Sodbury. My constituency also includes more than 50 villages, each with its own attractive character and identity. I hope that, during my time as Member for Northavon, I can play my part in protecting those towns and villages from the threat of over-development which is constantly hanging over them.

My predecessor, Sir John Cope, served the people of Northavon faithfully for 23 years. He rose to hold the office of Paymaster General between 1992 and 1994 and spent several years as Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office and the Department of Employment. He always conducted himself with dignity, and was gracious in defeat. I wish him well in his retirement.

As for me, I had rashly begun to feel quite pleased with myself, having been elected to Parliament at the tender age of 31. However, since 1 May, two events have shaken my self-confidence. First, I was approached in the Central Lobby by a journalist who asked whether I was one of the new Members of Parliament. "Yes," I replied eagerly, expecting fame and fortune to beckon. "How old are you?" he asked. I said, "I'm 31," to which he replied, "Too old, I'm afraid—we are looking for someone in their 20s." Clearly, I am already over the hill. The second event occurred yesterday, shortly after 5 pm. Discovering that the new Leader of the Opposition is just five years my senior makes me feel decidedly like an under-achiever who needs to buck up his ideas.

Turning to more serious matters, I am, as I have said, grateful for the chance to contribute to the discussion about the future of the Child Support Agency, and I welcome the Government's decision to hold this debate. The fact that there are problems with the agency is clear to me from my constituency surgeries, as I am sure it is clear to every hon. Member in the Chamber. Such is the predominance of the issue in my constituency postbag that I have begun to wonder what hon. Members did with their time before the Child Support Agency was invented.

I make it clear that, like my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), my preferred solution would be the outright abolition of the agency and its replacement—as replaced it must be—by a more flexible system of family courts which would seek to ensure that due maintenance is paid, but with more efficiency and humanity than the CSA has shown to date.

A family court system would have several advantages. First, the complexity of individual circumstances could be reflected in the amounts of maintenance finally awarded.

While there is clearly a need for consistency, it is apparent that the current formula-based system is creating a great deal of rough justice and resentment by not taking into account the relevant details of each case. A family court system, operating within a clearly defined framework, would be able to remedy some of those injustices.

A second important advantage of a family court system is that it would be locally based. One of the great frustrations with the Child Support Agency clearly stems from having to deal with an anonymous agency located many miles away. A court-based system would at least allow people to express their grievances face to face rather than through endless and lengthy correspondence.

Of course, a family court system would not be without its problems. Given the cuts in legal aid introduced by the previous Government, it would be necessary to ensure that people had equal opportunities to make their cases to the court. None the less, in view of the fundamental problems associated with the CSA, this approach must be considered seriously—particularly if further attempts at reform fail to produce a significant improvement.

I recognise that the Government may be unwilling to take such a drastic step so early in the new Parliament, however, so in the spirit of constructive opposition I will offer a few brief suggestions as to how the CSA could be reformed in order to lessen its negative impact on the lives of my constituents. The first change would involve reversing the planned cut in the agency's operating budget—which I understand is planned to fall from £212 million this year to £191 million in 1998-99. It is hard to see how the promise made earlier by the Secretary of State to improve the speed with which telephones are answered is compatible with a significant cut in running costs. Given the agency's notoriety for slow service, the cut seems a recipe for disaster—the fruits of which we shall see in our surgeries in future unless action is taken now.

The second change, which was discussed earlier, would be to introduce a modest disregard of maintenance into the income support system. That would give parents with care and absent parents an incentive to co-operate with the agency and would ensure that the children involved benefited—which was, after all, the alleged purpose of the Conservative Government's "Children Come First" proposals.

I suggest that the state should act as guarantor of the lone parent in employment when maintenance payments are interrupted or unilaterally terminated by the absent parent. If we are to encourage lone parents to take paid employment, we must give them the security that allows them to do so. Faced with the possibility—perhaps probability—that maintenance can be withdrawn at any moment by an unreliable absent parent, many lone parents may opt to rely on income support. If the state steps in to guarantee all or part of the payment during the period of interruption, lone parents will benefit as well as children and ultimately the Exchequer.

My wish is that all those involved in the tragedy of family breakdown should encounter a system which is fair and efficient and does not make an already difficult situation worse. I hope that some of the reforms that I have suggested will contribute towards that goal.

12.15 pm

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): It is a great privilege to intervene at this stage in the debate, not least because we have just heard two very fine maiden speeches. I know my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) reasonably well because I made a campaign visit to his constituency to talk about the welfare state, a subject not a million miles away from that of the Child Support Agency. My hon. Friend spoke with great eloquence and compassion. It was a strong speech and I congratulate him warmly on it.

I was struck by the fact that, as my hon. Friend said, when there was last a Labour Member for Wellingborough, he was only two years old. I thought to myself that, if he were a Conservative and given a couple more years, he would now be Leader of the Opposition.

We also heard a fine speech from the hon. Member for Northavon (Professor Webb). I must confess that the hon. Gentleman and I have an academic past. The hon. Gentleman was a specialist adviser to the Select Committee on Social Security before he became a Member of this place. He had also the rare distinction of teaching my daughter Caroline social policy at Bath university. The hon. Gentleman brought a great deal of expertise to his speech and made a good case for the family court solution—a solution that I reject, while I accept that it is an important part of the debate that we need to have.

My starting point on child support is poverty. Parliaments have considered the causes of poverty and the consequences for many decades. Indeed, I suppose that they have done so over many centuries. One of the real difficulties for our democracy is that, alongside the causes of poverty that have been well known to us for many years—economic recession, unemployment and low pay, for example—we are having to grapple with the poverty that is associated directly with family insecurities. There are high levels of divorce and many children are now born to single unmarried mothers. We, as a Parliament, are finding it difficult to tackle issues that are even more controversial and difficult to handle than the poverty that is associated only with economic insecurity.

I acknowledge, of course, that there is an overlap between economic and social insecurity. The latest data that I have seen are the low income data for 1992, which tell us that, of all children in poverty dependent on income support, 865,000 were in that position because their parents were unemployed. A more significant group of 1.7 million were in one-parent families.

Governments rightly stress the need to build up a strong economy, but we should stress also with equal passion the need to build up strong families. It is right that the Government are pursuing a twofold strategy. The welfare-to-work strategy has to be right as the first prong. We shall never be able to afford the benefit levels on income support that would bring people out of poverty. Income support is, of course, expensive to the taxpayer and socially it is expensive to the women and children, and some men, who are dependent on it. Work is the best pathway out of poverty in the longer term.

If we talk only about welfare to work, we risk being unfair to mothers. I would say that rule No. 1 for policy makers is that, when we talk about lone mothers, we should quickly talk too of complementary fathers. Unless we can ensure that we change the culture in Britain so that in future more fathers accept their financial responsibility for their children, we shall be in deep trouble socially. I welcome the debate initiated by the

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Government today. Over the centuries, women have been left holding the babies and the burdens. It is time to start redressing that balance.

We have heard much about the performance of the Child Support Agency. I want to ask Ministers a question, although I do not think that they can answer it—the previous Administration could not. I know about the performance indicators and the CSA but, at the more important end, what proportion of parents with care—that is the jargon, which usually means mothers on income support—are receiving maintenance? I emphasise the word "receiving". No one in the previous Parliament could tell me. My guess is that the proportion is less than one third. We need to know that. If we cannot supply the data, we need research on the matter, otherwise the performance indicators are misleading.

I have another question. How many maintenance assessments made lead to maintenance being paid? When I look at the performance indicators, I see encouraging statistics about assessments, but I see very discouraging statistics about money being paid, in full or at all. We need more data if we are to have a proper debate.

I disagree with those who argue—it is very much a men-dominated lobby—that we should scrap the CSA. I do not believe that to be the case. I say to our Liberal Democrat friends that if the court-based solution is the answer now, why was it not the answer when we had a court-based solution? Why did only one third of mothers get maintenance, and some of it in small amounts of money and irregularly?

Similarly, I am concerned about the complacency—to put it politely—that was creeping into the previous Administration. It was thought that, because performance indicators were moving in the right direction—although some of those were misleading because maintenance was not actually being paid—somehow we were getting matters right and the alarm bells could stop ringing. That complacency was not justified.

The Government must consider a radical reform of the CSA. That may necessitate a change in the name of the agency, to signal the radical nature of the reform. The first stage in the radical reform strategy is to focus not on cash, but on care. Hon. Members have touched on that during the debate.

Mr. Heald: The hon. Gentleman proposes changing the name—very much a new Labour policy. Would he like to change the logo?

Mr. Wicks: I am almost floored by that one. No doubt, we shall soon hear about the new Conservative party, so hon. Members should not knock changes of name. I am arguing a serious point, if the former Minister can cope with a serious point. If we introduce a radical reform programme and try to win a new public consensus behind what we are trying to achieve, we may have to signal that by changing the name of the agency. The term "CSA" may for ever be associated with the chaos that has been described.

I have seven recommendations in my strategy for reform. First, we should start with care, not cash. When the former Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher, launched the expedition back in January 1990, she said that no father should be able to escape his responsibilities. Her great mistake was immediately to speak about maintenance and cash. She should have asked a more challenging question: in turbulent family times, when possibly as many as half of our children will not spend all of their childhood living with both natural parents, how can we ensure that as many of those children as possible are brought up by both of their natural parents, and that fathers play a full role? That is the aspect of family diversity with which the debate should have begun. We should not dodge it. Only afterwards should we get on to the issue of child maintenance.

That has implications for the Family Law Act 1996, which I welcome—for example, the move towards mediation when a couple are contemplating divorce. How can a divorcing couple ensure that, in difficult times, they are thinking first about children, and not about themselves, so that contact is maintained? It also has implications for the Government's thinking on access orders. Many male constituents come to me and say, "The court said that I should have access to my child every weekend, but the mother will not let me see the child." They are then told by lawyers that they can go back to court, but that it will cost hundreds of pounds. That is not right. If a judge makes an access order, it must be implemented and there should not be a price on implementation. So there is an agenda of family policy that we need to relate to the debate about the CSA. If the Government could break some of the departmental boundaries and start discussions going, I would welcome that. That would be the start of my reform strategy.

Secondly, we need a fairer deal between mothers and children and the taxpayer. I support enthusiastically the call for a maintenance disregard. The Labour party document stated that it would be introduced when more resources were generated by the reform programme. That has to be the right approach. People are justly cynical that the Act is an Exchequer support Act rather than a child support Act. How can it be a child support Act when the vast majority of children and 70 per cent. of one-parent families on income support do not get a penny extra as a result of it? That is a misuse of English language. There should be a maintenance disregard. It is socially important and it would generate more money by winning more public confidence. Treasury officials, who can think about social policy only in the short term, will argue against it. They have to be confronted because, in the longer term, it makes financial and social sense.

Thirdly, the Government should revisit the formula. I am not certain about this, but I think that I would put my money on a far simpler formula in which clear percentages of net income are deducted. We should look at the Australian example and consider whether we should implement it. I know that a simpler formula is rougher justice. I am not a populist who calls for simplicity for the sake of it. People may say that they want a simpler formula because they do not understand it, but when they are affected by it, they want the system to cope with their peculiar family circumstances. I understand the issue, but I urge the Government at least to examine critically the case for a simpler formula.

Fourthly, we need a CSA with a human face. If parents telephone the CSA, they must have the right to talk to one named official—Mr. Brown or Mrs. Brown—who deals with their case and acts in a sense as their general practitioner, tells them where things are and has a duty to

report back to them. There should be speedier access to the appeals system. We should establish an independent child support advisory council, chaired perhaps by a family judge and including some critics of the system, to report to Parliament and the Secretary of State on how things are.

We should examine the interface between the Child Support Act and the Family Law Act 1996. It is naive not to have child maintenance issues at least on the table in the mediation process. People should be told when they contemplate divorce what the child maintenance settlement might look like.

I argue, as I have argued before, that in specific and difficult circumstances with which no formula or system of departures can cope, people should have a day in court and a judge should decide whether there should be a departure from the formula. That is the only matter on which I come close to Liberal Democrat colleagues. In a small proportion of cases—for example, where a child has special needs—there should be an opportunity to have a day in court.

Fifthly, my colleagues are right in saying that we should not pursue only the soft targets. We should devote special energy to pursuing the tough targets. It makes a mockery of the system when men can openly brag that they have never paid a penny for several children. I am sometimes in despair, as are mothers, when they tell me, "The agency said that it did not know where the father was. I found out where he was. I did detective work which the agency could never have done. I told it his address and where he worked. Two or three years later, the father has still not paid a penny." Why are we not getting the people who pose as victims but who are actually villains of irresponsibility? We shall never win public confidence until we tackle those dads.

Sixthly, the Government should consider the issue of collection. Australia preceded us in creating such an agency, and the Australia tax office was made the collection agency. It did not want to do it, just as our Inland Revenue said that it did not want to. In Australia, they said, "You are going to do it." We were not tough enough to say that to the Inland Revenue. How can it be that we got former employees of the Property Services Agency into the business of collection when the Inland Revenue had the records and the expertise? Even now, I urge the Government at least to look at this question.

Seventhly on my strategy for reform, we must relate the agency to the welfare-to-work strategy, and consider the issues that relate to guaranteed maintenance. It is difficult for mothers to make the jump from income support into work if maintenance is not paid regularly. It is a difficult question, and it may have financial implications. As part of the welfare-to-work strategy, the Government must examine the interface between child maintenance and irregular payments.

I have two general concluding points. First, we would fool ourselves if we believed that this will ever be anything other than a controversial policy area. Even if the CSA, or whatever it was called at the time, won prizes for bureaucratic competence and became a watchword for human sensitivity, it would still be controversial. This is an attempt by the state to intervene in the most personal and bloody matters, where emotions are raw and there is jealousy, and old battles are fought over. It will always be difficult and controversial for the Government—as they must, on behalf of the community—to try to get some fairness and balance into the system between the needs of men, women and children, and of first and second families. That is a reason to pursue the matter, not to avoid it.

My second point relates to my opening remarks on poverty. If we do not tackle the financial implications of family insecurity in a society where one in four of our children will have parents who are divorced, where every year 160,000 children under 16 have mums and dads who divorce, and with all the insecurities of single parenthood, we shall maintain new forces for poverty and social inequality that will destroy families and communities. Those are difficult issues for Parliament, but that is a reason to grasp nettles and pursue a radical reform programme for the sake of many of our children.

12.32 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I agree whole-heartedly with the two concluding remarks of the hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks). This is an inevitably controversial area of policy, and it will always remain so. Our priority must be relief of poverty and family insecurity, which are a legacy of a period in which individualism and laissez-faire moral liberalism combined to create a new irresponsibility throughout society. The first step in restoring a sense of responsibility in society is for the welfare state to cease to insulate those who have from those who have not. The responsibility of taxpayers for the poor does not end with the posting of a giro cheque from the Department of Social Security. Our sense of responsibility for the less fortunate may begin with that relationship, but it certainly does not end there.

I had some difficulty comparing the wish list of the hon. Member for Croydon, North with what the Secretary of State said. Many of the things that he wants used to be demanded by the Secretary of State when she was in opposition. Now that she is sitting on the Government Front Bench, she is finding things much more difficult. The reality of office is much more difficult than producing the weekly soundbite, so she has retreated from many of the comments that she used to make.

It is good to say, "Care, not just cash," but I note that the hon. Member for Croydon, North immediately went on to the issue of the disregard which is, if anything, a cash question. He premised his party's commitment to the disregard upon the success that the agency will have collecting the cash. Then, he went back to the old canard of the simpler formula. The truth of the simpler formula is not just that it leads to rough justice, but that we then need to introduce into the system the discretion to deal with the rough justice. That is why he advocates a simpler formula, combined with an appeal to some judicial process. Again, that does not solve any of the problems that the agency has. Indeed, it will probably make them more complicated.

I heard many echoes of our joint visit, with the Select Committee on Social Security, to Australia when we studied the Australian system. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) said, it is important to examine other systems, which show that there are no panaceas for the awkwardness and pain of the state intervening in this sector.

I do not apologise for the fact that this is about collecting money to relieve the burden on the taxpayer because that is the taxpayer's legitimate interest in this.

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The taxpayer should not underwrite the proliferation of people in a system, where the benefit system can be used to insulate individuals from the consequences of parenthood. We must keep that unashamedly at the forefront of our minds.

I join the hon. Member for Croydon, North in congratulating the hon. Members for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) and for Northavon (Professor Webb) on their maiden speeches. They both paid handsome tribute to their predecessors, whom Conservative Members miss for their personal qualities, not just for their political loyalty to the Conservative party. I thank both hon. Gentlemen for those tributes. I also congratulate them on breaking with what has become a rather tiresome tradition. When we came into the House five years ago, many of us were told to make uncontroversial speeches: that is the tradition of a maiden speech. Both hon. Gentleman demonstrated that it is a rather silly tradition. They both made real points of substance, which illuminated the debate and set the seal on their opening speeches.

The Secretary of State set out a broad philosophy of the Child Support Agency. In that philosophy, her renewed emphasis on the responsibility of parents and on the intentions of the agency to help children in poverty is identical to the philosophy that launched the agency under the last Conservative Government. I whole-heartedly agree with her invocation that this should not become a party issue. In the previous Parliament, we succeeded in maintaining, underneath the inevitable sparring across the Chamber, a solid consensus that the agency was going in the right direction. However, I am going to press her on some of her retreats, particularly that on the disregard. When we were in office, we said that it was a damaging policy because not only would it cost money, but it would act as a disincentive to single parents to return to work as they would lose the disregard the minute they started earning enough to disqualify them from benefit. That can only increase the poverty trap.

It is important to have a seamless web between dependency on welfare, work and maintenance payments from the CSA. Maintenance payments can provide a platform. While benefits are removed from the single parent pound for pound in benefit withdrawal, maintenance is not removed when the single parent returns to work. If half the income comes from benefit and half from maintenance payments, that is a considerably lower barrier to entry into the sort of part-time work that might be suitable for a single parent.

I want to make some general points about the Secretary of State's speech. She said—she can check this with the record—that no targets had ever been set for the CSA. As I said in my intervention, the Social Security Select Committee commented on the CSA's targets.

During the debate, I have been flicking through the CSA's excellent business plan for the current year, 1997-98. It is worth the right hon. Lady having a look at it as it shows that the targets that she thinks should be set have, in fact, already been set. In that plan, Ann Chant, the chief executive, said that it was part of

"our major objective to bring all maintenance assessments up to date by April 1999".

If that is a good target, the Government will accept it; if it is a bad target, they will change it—yet we heard nothing on that from the right hon. Lady.

The chief executive also said that she wanted

"greater reductions in our unit costs";

that the CSA planned

"to further improve the quality of service provided to all our clients";

that the agency had extended its accuracy target and

"introduced an Independent Case Examiner to provide clients with an impartial investigation service into matters of administration";

that the CSA had made

"a commitment to achieve the Investors in People . . . standard"—

that is an important role for an employer—and that the agency would make a

"quantum improvement in performance".

That is all part of the bipartisan consensus and it ill behoves the right hon. Lady to harry the Opposition as though none of that was happening while my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden was in office, and she had inherited nothing but a blank sheet of paper.

In the business plan, the chief executive talks about

"Providing the service our clients expect"

and the implementation of the programme of change. Under the heading, "What we will deliver", she refers to:

"A step change in performance and efficiency."

All the necessary figures are given.

The business plan also states:

"We will collect or arrange for direct payment from the absent parent . . . to the parent with care . . . child maintenance of some £500 million in 1997/98."

Is the Secretary of State planning to increase that target, is the target sufficient, or is it over-ambitious? That is the sort of qualitative analysis on which we expect to hold the Minister to account. She should not simply come out with inaccurate generalities about the previous Government.

I appreciate that the Minister without Portfolio has given instructions to Ministers to spend time slagging off the previous Conservative Administration and to keep up pressure on them to try to hide the inadequacies of the Government's policies. That will work for a while, but sooner or later the Government will have to take responsibility for what is happening. The right hon. Lady will have to say whether she thinks the Child Support Agency is working under her direction or, if it is not working, what she intends to do about it.

I shall conclude with a little hindsight. Indeed, the right hon. Lady indulged in a little hindsight. I shall make reflective points that are not designed to cause anybody any embarrassment. We should reflect, with hindsight, on two main points. The first is that the Child Support Agency was very much a big bang reform. The equivalent agencies introduced in Australia and elsewhere started by taking new cases and not by assuming old case loads. This Government, or future Governments, may well wish to consider other reforms. In dealing with such a sensitive issue, it is worth remembering that changing current arrangements is far more difficult and challenging than applying new rules to new arrangements. The departure formula and changes to the general formula were introduced not because of new cases in the system but to deal with the changed circumstances that have been imposed on people. Nevertheless, we understand why it

was necessary and desirable to challenge current arrangements—because they were ill serving both children in single-parent families and taxpayers.

The second point is that the architects of the Child Support Agency—in some ways reflecting the main objections to the Child Support Act 1991 during its passage—took the perspective of the parent with care, who might not want to give information and receive the money. We thought that we were establishing a payment agency and that money collection was incidental to making payments—because, after all, the Department of Social Security is predominantly an organisation that makes payments.

The CSA, however, operates primarily as a collection agency, and one can therefore understand why the Australians used their equivalent of the Inland Revenue. It would be impossible, however, for our Inland Revenue to manage a formula that is as sensitive and sensible as the one that we are considering. In considering the future, we should bear it in mind that the CSA is increasingly perceived as a collecting agency.

Let us maintain a reasonable atmosphere of consensus on the issue and a wall of unity against the few people who are trying to break down the consensus, who resist making payments and who think that they should be able to escape their obligations. Recently, in my advice bureau, I learnt of a man who had deliberately taken much more expensive accommodation than he required so that the maintenance that he paid would be reduced. We should sympathetically, diplomatically but firmly challenge that type of attitude and close such loopholes to stop abuse of the system. Let us ensure that we maintain a wall of solidarity on the issue, so that the reform will lead to the type of responsible society that all hon. Members want to build.

12.47 pm

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this debate. I speak with some apprehension, because I follow the speeches of many experienced hon. Members who have spoken with great expertise. I have been buoyed, however, by the speeches of my fellow maiden speakers, whom I congratulate. My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) spoke eloquently and inspirationally, and the hon. Member for Northavon (Professor Webb) spoke with confidence and was extremely thought-provoking. As a Scot, it is also a pleasure for me to follow the speech of the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), although I am somewhat surprised to find another Scot in the Chamber on a Friday morning.

As a lawyer with about 20 years' experience who, in part, specialised in child law, the principles and practice of the Child Support Act 1991, as amended, are of practical interest to me. As a Member of Parliament for some seven weeks, whose growing case load already features many apparently intractable and frustrating Child Support Agency cases, the review and reform of the operation of the CSA is of immediate practical interest to me and to many of my constituents. Accordingly, I welcome the debate as a timely opportunity to make a modest but, I hope, helpful contribution to the planned review. The fact that the issue is being addressed so early in the life of the new Labour Government is confirmation that, consistent with our manifesto commitment, we shall put the welfare of children at the heart of social security policy.

As this is my maiden speech, I crave the indulgence of the House while I pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Willie McKelvey, give hon. Members a flavour of my constituency and share with the House some of its aspirations. I shall try in a few short paragraphs to capture something of the personality of Willie McKelvey. However, before so doing, I am sure that the House will join me in sharing his regret that, having represented Kilmarnock and Loudoun for 18 years, all of them in opposition, his greatest wish—to support in this House a Labour Government—was cruelly snatched from his grasp by sudden illness a few weeks before the general election. Thankfully, he bounced back to health and activity very quickly, and it is the mark of the man that, despite his disappointment, he has expressed no trace of bitterness. Throughout the election campaign, and since, he has been a source of advice, support and common sense to me. For that, I wish to record a personal note of thanks.

Willie was elected as successor to Willie Ross, who retired in 1979, having held the seat for 33 years. My election, if it achieves nothing else, has broken more than half a century of tradition in terms of the constituency's Members' first name. I consider that a small but significant blow for individuality.

Willie McKelvey was a hard-working, reliable and empathetic constituency Member of Parliament. He was a tireless fighter and eloquent advocate, not only for the constituency and its interests but for Scotland. He was a true parliamentarian. Above all, however, he was a true democrat. I know that he will wish to be remembered for his successful campaign to democratise the procedures of the parliamentary Labour party, a campaign that he conducted with my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross). It was a difficult time for both of them as rookie Members of Parliament, but their eventual success is to their great credit.

In the previous Parliament, Willie McKelvey's skills and experience were recognised by his peers when he was selected to chair the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, a task that he dispatched with ability and no small measure of political courage. The Committee's report "Drug Abuse in Scotland" will live on as a testament to both qualities. He is a man of wide-ranging interests—from foreign affairs to greyhound racing, from Scotch whisky to occupational pensions—but, above all, he is interested in people. Throughout his term of office, he enjoyed an almost unique rapport with all who worked here in the Palace of Westminster. Neither title nor grand office was any bar to Willie's winning way and humour. He enjoyed an unparalleled level of friendship with the staff of the Palace—a friendship of equality with all. Throughout my election campaign, I was struck by the level of genuine affection for Willie shown by nearly all my constituents; I have had a similar experience here in the Palace. In my view, there is no better legacy than that. I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing Willie McKelvey a long and happy retirement with his wife Edith.

My constituency of Kilmarnock and Loudoun, which is part of Ayrshire, was my home for 20 years prior to my election. I have lived and worked with the people, and

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

now I am both honoured and privileged to be their parliamentary representative. Kilmarnock, the principal town of the constituency, is an industrial and market town in an agricultural setting. The constituency is famed for the Scotch whisky industry—the major bottling plant for Johnnie Walker is there—but it also has lace, footwear, hosiery, engineering, carpet and high-quality fashion industries. It is at present home to the Scottish cup holders, Kilmarnock football club, and also to the Scottish amateur cup holders, Knockentiber Amateurs.

Since the war, in common with many other areas, my constituency has suffered the decline of its indigenous industries. It now enjoys the unenviable reputation as one of the areas of highest unemployment in Scotland.

Thankfully, the area still has a varied, if somewhat contracted, industrial base and is enjoying a period of consolidation and adaptation, which has meant that developments are constantly occurring. That is thanks in no small measure to the ingenuity, skill, talent and hard work of the people of Kilmarnock and Loudoun. That is hardly surprising, as my constituency is the birthplace of people with such diverse talents and backgrounds as Alexander Fleming, who identified penicillin, and John Lloyd Dunlop, the inventor of the pneumatic tyre.

There is also much to be proud of in the literary field. In 1786, the first edition of Robert Burns' works was published in Kilmarnock. More recently, the town has given us the respected Scottish author, William McIlvanney, and his brother Hugh, universally regarded as one of the best sports writers in the country.

Many of the successful developments are testimony to the co-operation between East Ayrshire council, Enterprise Ayrshire and local industry. Those seeds of progress depend on the improvement of the area's infrastructure. The most important aspect of that is the completion of the major road link from the south of Glasgow to Kilmarnock. The constituency trusts that that project will survive the road building review announced yesterday.

I have three points to make about the subject of the debate. First, in reviewing the Child Support Agency, it is essential to restore the interests of children to the centre of the system of child support. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) reminded us that three of the four key problems that the CSA attempted to tackle were child-centred: the low level of support that the court systems required after parents paid; the disparities between different courts in fixing the amounts of child support; and the poor enforcement mechanisms to ensure that the court orders were met by absent parents.

However, there was another agenda, where the roots of the system's failure are to be found. Reducing the social security budget was a clear ideological objective of the previous Government. Their haste to achieve that objective resulted in the implementation of an ill thought out system. Within two years of the Act coming into force, major alteration was required, in the primary legislation and in the almost unintelligible regulations that set out its framework of operation. From that labyrinth, a bureaucratic nightmare has emerged. The system has lost sight of the child's needs. Its inflexibility and incomprehensibility have become a reason—although not an excuse—for non-payment by absent fathers, who have taken great advantage of the incompetence of the system.

I refer briefly to the case of one constituent. I have not trawled through my files of CSA cases for it. I have extracted one letter from the correspondence given to me by a constituent who consulted me about a CSA problem at my surgery last Friday. After a period of manifest incompetence by the CSA, the agency wrote to him on 22 April saying:

"If you continue to pay child maintenance from 1 May 1997, the CSA will not ask you to pay arrears owing from the period May 1994 to April 1997. Please make your first payment of £371 maintenance by 1 May 1997 and then further payments of £425 per month by 1 June 1997. This payment of £425 is made up as follows: £371 maintenance plus"—

yes, you've guessed it—

"£54 of arrears."

No doubt there is some convoluted explanation for the letter and it is not the contradiction that it appears to be, but what better excuse for a non-payer could one imagine than a system that, after protracted negotiations, can produce such an incomprehensible conclusion? No wonder that, despite the improvements of performance recorded by the Social Security Committee in its fifth report of March 1997, the figures released by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in a written answer to the hon. Member for Perth (Ms Cunningham) showed clearly that absent fathers continue to ignore CSA payment orders on an unacceptably large scale.

Secondly, while in no way wishing to disparage or demean the valuable work that lone parents do in nurturing, educating and caring for their children, I welcome the Government's objective of reforming the system of child support, so that all mothers who want to work may be freed from the poverty trap of benefits and can take up work outside the home. To achieve that objective, we require a system of child support that dovetails appropriately with further benefits.

A key to that objective is the maintenance disregard, a point on which I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), and the hon. Members for Roxburgh and Berwickshire and for Northavon. It is a valid criticism of the child support system that unlike those receiving family credit or the disability working allowance, who are allowed to keep up to £15 with no loss of benefit, lone mothers on income support gain no advantage from the payments made by absent fathers. The Benefits Agency takes the lot and sets it against the benefits being paid out. That policy is short-sighted.

The introduction of a maintenance disregard into the income support system would mean an improvement for the lot of children and would assist the Government's objective of helping more carer parents to move from welfare to work rather than in the opposite direction. A further benefit is that a maintenance disregard would undermine another lame excuse by non-payers, in that they would no longer be able to claim that their payments did not help the children. A maintenance disregard would also provide an incentive for increased co-operation with the system by carer parents. The resultant increase in absent fathers paying would increase the amount of benefit saved. For all those reasons, it is arguable that such a modest reform could be self-financing, a proposal that should be susceptible to assessment by research.

Thirdly, I draw attention to one aspect of the CSA that has received little attention other than from academics. The controversy surrounding the CSA has spawned many interest groups, but little attention has been paid to the issue of whether its operation is always consistent with the terms of the European convention on human rights. A Government who are committed to the incorporation of the principal terms of the convention into domestic law must be alert to the question whether the child support system can co-exist with the terms of the convention's articles.

I refer in particular to the terms of article 8, which enshrines the right to the enjoyment of family life. Like almost everything to do with the CSA, the arguments on that point are complex and it would be inappropriate for me in this speech to go into them in any detail. Principally, they centre on the view that following a previous agreement, such as a clean-break settlement, an absent parent who is required to make substantially increased support payments to children from a prior relationship may suffer a significant reduction in his opportunity to provide for his new family. In the European context, it may be no defence to say that the CSA is merely following UK domestic law. The argument that there has been a breach of the convention will be more accessible to an aggrieved party once we have incorporated the principal terms of the convention into domestic law.

I have limited myself to three points. I share many of the other concerns about the operation of the CSA. I trust that my observations will be of some assistance to the proposed review.

1.2 pm

Mrs. Jackie Ballard (Taunton): I am pleased to follow the excellent maiden speech by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne). He spoke with great eloquence and humour, and gave fulsome praise to his predecessor, for whom he obviously has great respect and affection. It may surprise the hon. Gentleman to know that there is yet another Scot in the Chamber this morning, albeit that I do not represent a Scottish constituency.

I hope that the public do not view the lack of attendance by hon. Members in this debate as a sign of lack of interest in the topic. The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) said that the protests and difficulties associated with the CSA had diminished. The protests on the streets may have diminished, but the difficulties have, if anything, increased, as other hon. Members have said when talking about their advice surgeries. Every week, we all have a steady stream of people who have had problems with the CSA.

To those people, the Child Support Agency seems to be an agency that was set up primarily to reduce the benefits bill or to pursue absent parents who had already made voluntary agreements for maintenance. It is not seen by most people as primarily an agency set up to support children, which is what it ought to be.

I hope that the Secretary of State will consider, as my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) has said, the benefit penalty for non-co-operation with the CSA. I hope that it will be removed or reduced, because all it does is put more children further into poverty. Under the guise of punishing single parents, children suffer. Many women are frightened to pursue absent fathers, not just because of a fear, perhaps, of physical danger, but because of a fear that their relationship with the children or the absent parent will grow worse, and that their children will suffer indirectly as a result.

I use the terms "absent parent" and "parent with care" because they are in the legislation, but they are offensive to many absent parents who continue to care for their children. I hope that we can find better terminology.

The next area that I wish to touch on is that of the absent parent who is self-employed. I do not think that other hon. Members have mentioned that so far. There is a desperate need for effective assessment and enforcement in regard to the self-employed. It should be a high priority. Although I, too, would like to return to a system of family courts, I know that pursuing self-employed fathers for maintenance was no more successful under the previous system than it is now.

I know of one instance in which a self-employed sole proprietor was able in court to claim allowances for purchasing new computers and a new company car, and was finally assessed as having to pay maintenance of £1 a year for a teenage child. Even if that assessment had been reasonable—I should not think that anyone in the land would think that it was—the enforcement was not there. The enforcement system for children of self-employed fathers is still failing those children.

If the CSA is really an agency for child support, we need to look again at the formula for assessing maintenance, to acknowledge the needs of children of first and second families. Some hon. Members may think it irresponsible to go on to have a second family if the first family is not properly supported, but in neither family is it the fault of the children. They should not be punished.

I should like the Secretary of State to give an answer on this point—I should like him to consider when the CSA will start to deal with voluntary applications from people who are not on benefit. Again, their children also deserve a reasonable standard of living.

Each hon. Member who has spoken today mentioned three or four—perhaps even seven—things that they would like changed about the Child Support Agency and its operations. If all those changes took place, the CSA would not be recognisable as the agency that it is today. I believe that it is fundamentally flawed. The public perception of it is so bad—many parents with care are not receiving the maintenance to which they are entitled, and many absent parents are driven to despair or even to suicide by faulty or unfair assessments.

I do not believe that the CSA can be improved by tinkering. I believe that it needs root-and-branch reform. The House should admit that perhaps it did get it wrong when the CSA was set up, and perhaps the only alternative is to scrap it completely.

1.7 pm

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): I congratulate hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. It must be a great relief to them to have got them over with and to have acquitted themselves so well.

I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on her decision, which she announced yesterday, I think, not to implement the housing benefit regulations

[Dr. Lynne Jones]

which would have meant that single people up to the age of 60 would have qualified for benefit only if they were in shared accommodation. That is one inheritance from the previous Tory Government, and the new Secretary of State has dealt with it promptly and effectively. I congratulate her on that. I do not underestimate the problems that will be caused in her Department, not least on the budgetary front.

Sadly, the poisoned chalice that my right hon. Friend has inherited in the form of the Child Support Agency will not be dealt with quite so quickly. I am pleased that today's debate will allow hon. Members to put their point of view, which I am sure my right hon. Friend will take on board.

The Child Support Act 1991 is probably the best argument for fundamentally reforming the procedures of this House. As the former Secretary of State pointed out, it was passed without opposition, which the Labour party should live to regret. I happen to know that, at the time, the Opposition spokesperson wanted to vote against the Bill, realising how fundamentally flawed it was, but was barred from doing so by collective responsibility. There was consensus that absent parents should have to contribute to the maintenance of their children, and we were reluctant to be portrayed as wishing to disagree with that concept by opposing the Bill. That made for poor legislation. Had we used the Special Standing Committee procedure, we could have taken evidence from expert witnesses and ended up with much more effective legislation.

Mr. Kirkwood: I generally support what the hon. Lady says. I was there at the time and, by way of an alibi, may I suggest that we all pointed out that it was an enabling Act? The vast majority of the real damage was done by statutory instrument. There was all-party support for the principal legislation. I hope that the hon. Lady will discourage her Government from getting into the habit of passing brief, enabling legislation because all the damage is then done by secondary legislation.

Dr. Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a telling point. He will be aware that the Government are reviewing procedures of the House and I am sure that they will learn lessons from some of the past failures.

Despite the fact that the Act came into operation just over four years ago, it has been amended by primary legislation on no fewer than two occasions since. So many changes have been made to the regulations that what began as a simple way to get parents to take on board their responsibilities is now extremely complex. In an Adjournment debate at the end of the last Session, the former Minister almost proudly talked about the 140 changes that had been made to the operation of the Child Support Agency. That just shows the chaos that has reigned.

When those changes were implemented, all hon. Members hoped that they would lead to improvements—that the backlog would be dealt with and that we would begin to get to grips with the problem. My experience, however, is that things are getting worse again. I do not know why, but lately the number of people coming to me with problems has started to rise again. More than half the cases are not in payment. In the Dudley office, which covers my area, on 23 May this year, there were 52,221 incidences of outstanding payments—probably 52,000 incidences of misery, let alone cases in which an assessment has not yet been made.

Most of the cases presented to me are of working women who are struggling to bring up their children but getting no help from the children's fathers who have, at every opportunity, tried to ensure that they do not contribute. The Secretary of State is well aware of that from the cases that she has cited.

My latest referral to the ombudsman is a case where the maintenance inquiry form was issued on 16 March 1994 and not a penny has yet been paid. Another case dates back to October 1993; it is another example of an absent parent denying paternity. Although paternity was established last October, no money has yet been paid because the man in question is wriggling out of his obligations in other ways. I could cite other cases but time is short.

From the perspective of parents with care and absent parents who pay their way and wish to contribute to the well-being of their children, the Act and the CSA do not work. It is not the fault of the staff, who face an impossible task. Given present circumstances, I have little confidence—notwithstanding the skill of the new Secretary of State and the new Government—that the targets will be met without fundamental change. The problem is that every time we change the way things operate and introduce new regulations, the more complexity and delay we create.

We have, in effect, the worst of all worlds. We do not have a simple formula, but we have a complex one that nobody understands. We have the ability to refer the matter to a tribunal—in effect, a court-based system for departures. It is time to look at proposals to go back to a court-based system, and I hope that my right hon. Friend will study the proposals by the Solicitors Family Law Association for a unified family court.

I listened with care to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), who I felt was making an argument for a return to a court-based system. He was advocating the opportunity for appeals. We could save money and simplify the procedures if we returned to a court-based system. Under the divorce reforms, mediation schemes are being set up. It seems to me that when a couple are breaking up and their marriage or relationship is ending, the mediation procedure is the time to look at the financial arrangements. In the long run, it would save money and I appeal to my right hon. Friend to consider it.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the biggest problems the agency has to cope with is absent parents who refuse to co-operate with the CSA or give the proper information, and who then refuse to comply with the payment demands? Will she take this opportunity to say that while the system continues to exist—she vainly hopes that it will be abolished—she will encourage her constituents and others to comply with the CSA and to pay the money asked for, as that is in the best interests of the absent parent?

Dr. Jones: That goes without saying, and I wonder at the purpose of that intervention. These are the very cases about which I am so concerned. Families are not getting the money from irresponsible fathers—invariably it is the fathers.

To return to my point about a court-based system, the change could not be implemented overnight; the CSA could continue with its current case load, but perhaps should not take on any new cases, which should be taken on by a court-based system. It will take time to implement such a procedure. The failure of the system was not necessarily in the decisions—although we could have had national guidelines to ensure consistency—but in enforcement.

The CSA is bogged down in assessments and has a horrendous job with the fathers to whom the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) was referring, who are avoiding responsibility. I have one constituency case where the absent parent denies receiving any correspondence. That has been going on for months. That work is unnecessary, but it would not be the case if the matter was dealt with by the courts. The father would have to appear for a day in court where all the details of the case could be taken on board and the father questioned on his circumstances. That is something that the CSA is unable to do.

The CSA—or, preferably, some renamed body, possibly under the wing of the Inland Revenue—could concentrate on enforcement of the court decisions or, in the transitional period, the CSA decisions, to ensure that, once an assessment is made, absent parents have to pay up.

Before concluding, I shall return to the issue of the disregard. I also hope that, in time, it will be possible to implement the disregard. Although it is not a specific commitment in our manifesto, it is clearly implied that that would be the correct move. Politicians are not the only group to call for the introduction of the disregard. A report released in 1994 by five children's charities pointed out that many families on income support were worse off as a result of the CSA's demands for maintenance. In the past, many absent parents who did not pay maintenance often bought presents for their children, took them out and so on. Those arrangements are not taken into account when calculating maintenance payments.

I do not advocate a return to that informal system: I believe that mothers should receive payments as of right. However, many children are worse off as a result of the CSA's activities. It is a question not simply of creating disincentives to work, but of children's well-being. The disregard will help the very poorest children, and I hope that it will be implemented.

Sole parents often want to work, but I do not think that we should force mothers who do not wish to work—particularly when their children are very young—into employment. I returned to work when my children were only a few weeks old, but many mothers have good reasons for not doing so. I think that they should benefit from the maintenance that is paid.

I began my speech by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on the important change that she has made already. I am sure that she will take on board the points that have been raised this morning and will do her best to ensure that we have a system of child maintenance of which we can be proud.

1.21 pm

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) and the hon. Member for Northavon (Professor Webb) on their excellent maiden speeches. I did not know that William and Hugh McIllvanney were brothers—one learns something every day.

I am glad to participate in this debate as I asked a question several weeks ago about the workings of the Child Support Agency. In his answer, the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley), commented that the CSA seemed to be getting slightly more efficient. According to most hon. Members to whom I have spoken, the situation appears to be worsening again. I am not quite sure why: it is probably due to the previous Government's successive cuts in social spending, year on year.

Virtually every hon. Member to whom I have spoken has confirmed that he or she has many constituency cases involving the Child Support Agency. I am a new Member of Parliament—I have been here for only seven weeks—and I have eight or 10 such cases, or about two new cases every week. One hon. Member to whom I have spoken has 97 cases and another has 140. One of those cases—none of which is trivial—involves a constituent who received two letters from the Child Support Agency on the same day giving wildly differing figures for maintenance payments. Such mistakes are causing enormous anguish and worry to thousands of our constituents. They are not just on the periphery: they are fundamental problems that point to major deficiencies in the workings of the CSA. I am glad, therefore, that there is to be a fundamental review of the CSA's activities.

Many demands are wrong, inaccurate and inconsistent. One of my constituents is told, almost weekly, of differing maintenance demands, ranging from nil to about £10 per week. My constituent is on benefit, so he should pay nothing. The Child Support Agency acknowledges that fact every few weeks but, in the meantime, continues to demand maintenance payments of £4, £6 or £8. My constituent is out of work but trying desperately to get back into work. He is finding that extremely difficult psychologically because he is being prevented from concentrating on finding a job. The worry remains at the back of his mind, "What will they come up with next? Will they force me to pay the wildly inaccurate assessments that they keep foisting on me?"

The main problem is not posed by those who provide accurate details. One of the greatest problems that the public perceive with the CSA is that if honest and straightforward people provide accurate details and are open with the agency, they will be hammered. The common perception is that those who do not provide proper details get away with it. Those who are under the agency's screw are those who are the more honest and straightforward.

The problems with the CSA were predicted by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Welfare Reform when he said:

> "We shall be overwhelmed by fathers coming in to our surgeries. It will not be those who have never paid, because they will be too ashamed to turn up. It will be those who are paying and feel that they are getting a rough deal."—[*Official Report*, 10 February 1994; Vol. 237, c. 500.]

[Mr. John Cryer]

My right hon. Friend was right and his remarks were prescient.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland said, at about the same time:

"Despite the changes that the House will approve tonight, I trust, we should not ignore the continuing and dangerous unhappiness that underlies and reinforces our duty to get the balance right."—[*Official Report*, 2 February 1994; Vol. 236, c. 95.]

It is clear that the balance is still not right.

The Child Support Act 1991 enjoyed all-party support because no one in this place disagreed that parents who have become absent have a responsibility to support their children. That is generally accepted. Unfortunately, things went badly wrong between enactment and the creation of the agency. It is relevant to concentrate on the context in which the agency was introduced.

In 1979, only one in 10 children were living in poverty. Three or four years ago, the number had increased to one in three or one in four. A report was produced about three or four years ago by Action for Children, a long-standing charity that was set up more than 150 years ago. It claimed that 1.5 million families were unable to provide their children with the diet of a pauper living in an east-end workhouse 120 years ago. That is an indictment of the previous Government's policy if ever I heard one.

The Conservative Government spotted a golden opportunity to subsidise their social spending by taking money from absent parents, paying it to mothers looking after children—it usually is mothers—and then reducing income support. It was a golden opportunity that the Conservatives could not resist, and that is exactly what happened. They thought that they could cut social spending by taking money from absent fathers.

The scheme presented the Conservative Government with enormous problems. They set up the CSA in great haste and the result was a shambles. It was also set up on the cheap. It was not properly resourced, staffed or organised. I am pleased that in various documents issued by the Labour party there are commitments radically to reform the agency. "Children First: Reform of the Child Support Agency", which was issued about a year ago, states:

"Our proposals will rescue the decent principle of parental responsibility from the thoroughly bad practice of the Child Support Agency."

In another document, my right hon. Friends then on the Opposition Front Bench stated:

"The CSA should be made to adopt a policy that would be consistent, fair and efficient."

I suspect, however, that unfortunately the only way to reach that stage will be by getting rid of the agency and starting again. The mess left by the previous Government will not be tidied up by a few reforms here and there. We must be more radical. Perhaps it would be a good idea to examine the Australian model. The Australian version of the agency is rooted in the Australian version of the Inland Revenue, and there is a role for family courts which play an important part in dealing with absent parents.

I agree with earlier comments that whatever we do about child support, it will never be an easy matter and will always attract controversy. Nevertheless, we can do a great deal better than the shambles that we inherited from the previous Administration, who adopted their policy only to subsidise their social spending.

1.29 pm

Mrs. Eileen Gordon (Romford): If we are radically to improve and reform the Child Support Agency, as we must, it is important to consider what went wrong after its implementation.

In my previous life—before I was elected as the Member for Romford—I was the constituency caseworker for the Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks). I was working for him when the previous Government introduced the CSA. The impact in our office and on the people involved was immediate and devastating, so I feel that I am speaking from experience.

Parents who had previously had amicable arrangements with ex-partners and who had felt settled were immediately thrown into turmoil. The legislation should not have been retrospective. The result was a shambles. When the agency was set up, it was incompetent and unable to cope with the volume of work. The staff were overwhelmed. Those whose forms they did not lose were pursued relentlessly. Fathers were caused untold misery and in some cases were driven to suicide.

The agency became notorious for its incompetence. Like much that the previous Government did, the agency was set up in haste and repented, not by the then Government, but by its victims. In my office we dealt with cases where parents—usually the dad—could no longer visit their children, give them treats or buy them clothes because of the crippling burden placed on them by the CSA.

It soon became evident that the CSA was mopping up easy targets—parents who had been openly and honestly supporting their children—yet was unable to call to account the irresponsible, couldn't-care-less parents. That was a reversal of the supposed aims of the Act, and who benefited? Certainly not the parents caring for the children, who gained little or nothing—indeed, many were worse off, because of the strain caused by the bitterness. That affected the children, as it did the children of any second family, who found it impossible to manage on the income that was left. That put strain on the second family, sometimes to breaking point.

No one is arguing that parents should not be responsible for their children. A child is a lifelong commitment. Both parents must share that responsibility, but the system must be fair and take into account the position of the absent parent. What is the good of starting off with one family in poverty and ending up with two? It makes no sense from the children's point of view or from society's.

I am glad that the Government are intent on a thorough reform of the CSA to make it fair and competent. The minor reforms introduced by the previous Government were too little, too late. Parental responsibility is one thing; parental misery is another. I hope that all interested groups will be involved in the reform process, and that those groups will be happy with the outcome, as I am sure they will be.

I thought earlier that I heard an apology from the Opposition Benches—an apology for the suffering caused when the CSA was established. I thought that it was an apology, but looking back, I think it might have been a case of new leader, new conscience.

1.34 pm

Mr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): I start by congratulating hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today and Opposition Members on what can be described only as outrageous impudence. The former Secretary of State—I think that that is who he is, although he seemed to be having an identity crisis earlier—presided over the first five years of the Child Support Agency. In his own words, it came to the point of virtual collapse. Yet he expects the Labour Government, in their seventh week of office, to have arrived at a recipe for sorting out the mess. That is impudence of a high order. I was amused to hear another Opposition Member try to make the Government accept responsibility for the mess. I seem to remember that for the past 18 years everything that went wrong was blamed on the previous Labour Government. So let us get that sort of nonsense out of the way.

It is clear to me as a new Member of Parliament and to all my colleagues that the CSA is failing to deliver. Our most common topic of conversation is the CSA and the problems that it brings us in our case work. It is certainly clear that the agency is failing to deliver justice. It is delivering primarily a great deal of hardship and heartache to its victims. I shall not spend any more time giving detailed examples. We have heard many harrowing cases already. I have more, but time is running short.

The question is what to do for the future. Unlike the former Secretary of State, I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not come into the debate with a fixed programme. It is brave to hold this debate so that we can have an open-ended discussion on this complex and difficult issue before any statement is made about action for the future. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on that.

Mr. Lilley: The hon. Gentleman, like the Secretary of State, was not elected on a blank sheet of paper. The Labour party issued and stood for election on a policy document which promised, among other things, a maintenance disregard. Does the hon. Gentleman remain committed to that promise even if the Secretary of State has already reneged on it?

Mr. Turner: It is unfair to say that my right hon. Friend has reneged on that promise. She has not had time to start.

Mr. Lilley: She said no.

Mr. Turner: The system is under review. I intended to mention the maintenance disregard later. I support the principle. So the right hon. Gentleman's question is simply dealt with.

What do we do about the future? I am agnostic. I have a great deal of sympathy with hon. Members who advocate tearing up the CSA and starting all over again. However, we have enabling legislation which we can use to build a new framework without going through the time-consuming process of further legislation when we already have a packed legislative programme. We have an urgent problem to deal with and we should look for the fastest and most effective way of tackling it. If that means abolishing the CSA and if we can find a quick and effective way of doing so, that is fine. However, if it means a root-and-branch reform of the CSA, that is also fine and that is the way in which we should proceed.

I do not have a great deal of sympathy with those who want to return the responsibility to the family courts, but if a working mechanism can be found along that route, fine. There are arguments in favour of using the court system because it brings people together instead of placing them at either end of a paperchase. It allows them to discuss and resolve an issue and agree on the spot. Then we are simply left with an enforcement problem. The more this debate continues, the more obvious it is that the answer is not simple but needs careful discussion. It will need all the input that we can get before we can agree a solution. I have every confidence that the Secretary of State will undertake that process and make a statement to the House as soon as possible on her proposals to deal with the problem. I am glad that she opened this debate so early in the life of the Government and responded to the evident concerns of hon. Members. I tabled an early-day motion, which is attracting signatures at a considerable rate. That shows the strength of feeling in the House on the matter.

There are issues that are almost independent of structure, such as the maintenance disregard. I have much sympathy with guaranteed payments. I know that that may have budgetary implications, but it would be a great incentive for whatever collection agency was involved to get the money in if it had to pay money out. That would give stability to parents with care that they do not have at the moment. Having to switch around by moving from income support one week to getting paid next week can get people into an awful mess. I have the deepest sympathy for them. We should consider maintenance disregard, guaranteed payments and abolishing the penalty for parents who do not co-operate with the agency for whatever reason. That does not penalise the parents but penalises the children. An agency primarily concerned with the interests of children should not penalise them.

We must reconsider the proposed budget changes. The operational budget of the CSA has been reduced year on year. It is hardly surprising that it is not becoming any more efficient if it is suffering from staff cuts. Whatever its future form, it cannot tolerate further staff cuts and expect to deliver a service. We must have an open mind, but we must also deal with the problem with the greatest urgency.

1.42 pm

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I am glad that we are having this important debate today. The Child Support Agency is the most frequent problem that I encounter in my constituency surgeries. Several of my constituents had their fingers crossed on 1 May, hoping for a Labour Government to bring some sense to the madness of the Tories' Child Support Agency and to give them hope where the Tories had left them in despair. There is no doubt that the Tories' CSA has ruined many people's lives.

Mr. Heald: The hon. Lady calls it the Tories' Child Support Agency. Does she not realise that it had all-party support at all stages?

Ms Drown: I fully realise that, but the CSA was set up by the Tories and run by them for many years. They did

[Ms Drown]

not review it when many people said that it needed to be changed and changed again until it met the needs of families.

I agree with the Secretary of State that a review of the Child Support Agency is desperately needed, and I am glad that we are starting it today. My constituents ask for three things—that we make the agency foster co-operation between the agency and parents and between parents and children; that it should provide support to families rather than pulling them further apart, and be fair to both partners; and that it should give proper incentives for people to go to work and to co-operate with the agency. That means providing flexibility in the agency's rules. When I talk about incentives for lone mothers to go to work, that is shorthand for incentives to go into paid work outside the home—because if bringing up children alone at home is not work, I do not know what is.

It is shameful that the CSA has been ineffective in increasing the proportion of fathers who pay regular maintenance for their children. It confirms what constituents say to me: the agency seems to have been set up to penalise people who co-operate and to ignore those who do not. That is why we need to create the incentives for families to co-operate. All the fathers who have talked and written to me want to co-operate with their former partners and to contribute to the maintenance of their children. Rather than being helped by the CSA, however, they have been hindered and the result has often been a complete breakdown in communication between the former partners, to the great hurt of the children involved.

I am confident that we can improve the situation. We can make it a people-friendly service. We can make rules that are understandable and we can give people time so that their situation can be explained. We can also provide sensible links with the good money advice centres throughout the country, as I know constituents who have become stuck in problems with the CSA and have had debt problems. We can make an obvious link to put them in contact with people who can help them.

To give a couple of examples, a mother in my constituency knows that the father is contributing to the CSA and to maintenance payments. She telephones the agency regularly every week, giving them all the details of her situation and that of the father. That has gone on for months, but not one payment has been made to her. In another case, the father wants to co-operate and to understand the assessment that has been made of his situation. He even offered to go to the agency so that he could have the assessment explained to him in person, line by line. He was told that there was no point. Can hon. Members imagine the desperation that that father feels, not knowing how to make his pay cheque last until the end of the month and with the CSA saying that he has to keep paying at that rate?

My constituents' first priority is therefore the creation of a co-operative agency which allows partners to remain supportive, looking after their children, and which makes support a reality rather than just a word in its title. They also want fairness to both partners. Fathers rightly feel bitter that if they find a new partner, all of that partner's incomings and outgoings will be taken into account, but if the mother with care of the child finds a new partner, none of his incomings or outgoings will be taken into account.

Lastly, but most importantly, we need to create incentives which will work for fathers as well as for mothers. That means introducing flexibility into the system because no two families are the same. It is difficult to find boxes which fit all our different circumstances and many people suffer because they do not fit into the current rules.

Lots of expenses are not allowed, which common sense dictates should be allowed, in the CSA's equations. One of my constituents secured access to his children via a court order, which gave pleasure to him and to his children. After six months, however, the contact was stopped and he again had to go to the courts and spend a lot of money regaining access to his children. He spent £4,000 which he could barely afford, but the CSA will not recognise that, so he is in debt. That seems wrong. He wants to contribute to his children's maintenance, but he also wants to see them. He pointed out to me that if he were unemployed, he would at least qualify for legal aid in trying to get access to his children. It is surely wrong that he should be thinking about giving up his job in order to get legal aid to continue to see his children. The CSA's rules must allow the flexibility to give such parents incentives to stay in work.

Another of my constituents agreed with his partner that he would pay towards their child's education. Over the years, he paid out about £12,000. However, the CSA has decided that he has paid nothing. He and his wife made an agreement, but the CSA will not recognise it. Because of that, he and his wife no longer get along, to the great disadvantage of the child. The CSA simply says that my constituent has paid nothing and that he owes £12,000. That cannot be right. There needs to be some flexibility in the system to allow for parents to make such arrangements.

The third example is of a difficult break-up between a husband and wife. While together, they had financial difficulties and had to take out loans. They decided that it would be best to take a loan from the husband's parents. However, the CSA says that it was not an official loan and cannot be taken into account. That man's pay cheque simply will not cover his expenses and the maintenance for his child. Similarly, the CSA makes no allowance for the fact that the wife emptied their joint bank account when they split up, again costing my constituent thousands of pounds. When things like that can be proven, the CSA needs to have the flexibility to take them into account so that it can make a fair and just analysis of each parent's position. Without that, more and more fathers will want to give up altogether. Because there is no flexibility in the system to allow for those sorts of expenses, fathers think that there is no point in working. We need to create incentives for the fathers to stay in work as well as to encourage mothers to find work outside the home.

There is also a problem with tax relief. Some of the fathers who bring their cases to me have not been married, but they want to pay maintenance for their children. They rightly ask why their maintenance payments are not allowed for tax purposes when they are allowed for married fathers. Surely it should be the same for all fathers who are supporting their children.

My constituents want my right hon. Friend to ensure that the agency allows fathers and mothers to co-operate with each other. They want the agency to create the sort of atmosphere that enables it truly to be seen as a support

agency. I am sure that they will welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement today of a telephone system with somebody on the end of the line when people telephone the agency. As she rightly said, people should also be able to telephone the agency outside normal working hours. Many of those who have spoken to me have expressed annoyance at having to conduct their personal life while at work.

We want an agency that is fair to both partners and provides incentives for both partners to work. That means creating flexibility in the rules.

1.52 pm

Mr. Oliver Heald (North–East Hertfordshire): We have had a good debate. The Secretary of State's objective of holding a debate in which all points of view can be expressed has been justified because a whole range of points has been made. Perhaps the right hon. Lady has adopted the slogan, "It's good to talk." British Telecom will be pleased with the adoption of the slogan as well as with the improvement of the telephone system at the Child Support Agency.

We have heard some excellent maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) paid a generous tribute to his predecessor, Sir Peter Fry—although it was somewhat marred by a snide aside. Other than that, it was a model of its kind. The hon. Member for Northavon (Professor Webb) was quite a contrast with the hon. Member for Wellingborough, who spent a good deal of time convincing us that Wellingborough was an old Labour seat. We have not yet seen whether he is old Labour, but he is certainly young Labour—whereas the hon. Member for Northavon spent a great deal of time explaining to us that he is really very old. Both hon. Members made extremely good maiden speeches.

In his maiden speech, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) rightly paid tribute to William McKelvey, who was very popular in the House and widely respected. I am sure that all hon. Members will agree with that tribute.

Added to the tributes paid to Sir Peter Fry and William McKelvey was the very generous tribute paid by the hon. Member for Northavon to Sir John Cope, who well served the United Kingdom over many years. Sir John was highly respected in the House, and I am sure that all hon. Members were pleased to hear that tribute to him.

In his speech, the hon. Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) continued his campaign on the subject in his customary fashion.

We heard a thoughtful speech from the hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), who engaged in debate with me and other Opposition Members on the subject of social security. I always enjoyed debates with him when I was a Minister and he was an Opposition spokesman, and perhaps it will not be too long before he goes to the Treasury Bench.

I pay tribute also to Andrew Mitchell—the former hon. Member for Gedling—who has been mentioned in the debate. In the past two years, he was the Minister who presided over the changes and substantial improvements to the Child Support Agency. As Ministers will discover, it is rather easier to criticise an agency that is effecting a massive change in culture than it is successfully to manage that change. The changes implemented by Andrew Mitchell—with the full support of the CSA's chief executives and members of staff, who worked tremendously hard—have begun to change the agency, thereby making it much more efficient and effective.

We should not forget the situation before those changes were begun. In Britain, we had developed a culture in which knowledge that the state would provide led many parents to forget society's obvious expectation that parents could not simply leave a relationship and relinquish all responsibility for their children.

Responsibilities of parenthood were not sufficiently respected both by some mothers and by some fathers. Mothers often would not allow access to the children when they should have, and fathers often would not pay for the children's upkeep. The two issues were interlinked. Mothers often said, "We're not prepared to let you see the children because you're not paying," and fathers said, "I'm not paying because I'm not seeing my children." I remember many a court door at which, as the family finances were discussed, the Department of Social Security was the silent third party that was wrongly required to shoulder some or all of the responsibility for the children.

Under the old system, maintenance orders for children were very erratic and often pitifully low. Moreover, enforcement of the orders was not good. Many fathers failed to abide by court orders and were never sufficiently taken to task.

Most hon. Members realise that, even with two actively involved parents, it is tough to raise children, especially in their teenage years. When things go wrong and one parent leaves and is not at home to share the daily care of a child, it is vital that that parent should maintain contact and share some of the financial burden for the child's upkeep. I am sure that all hon. Members know how expensive it is to raise a child. Also, if the mother is wholly dependent on benefits, it is much harder for her to get off welfare and into work. Those two considerations drove the House to set up the Child Support Agency in 1991. If there is a raft of child maintenance at a reasonable level, the mother has a very real incentive to work.

The agency was set up with all-party support and the legislation was passed without a single opposing vote. The principle was that parents should pay for the maintenance of their children if they could and that the taxpayer should help if parents did not have the necessary resources. The scheme was designed to be fair and consistent.

The House was genuinely shocked at the reaction to the implementation of the scheme. It is easy to trade party political points, but I remember the right hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar), who was then Labour's leading spokesman on the matter, expressing that sense of shock from the Dispatch Box and accepting that changes would have to be made, just as the Government accepted it. Changes were made: payment levels were made fairer, greater weight was given to prior court settlements and further flexibility was added to the system.

I see that the Minister for Welfare Reform is now in his place. He was one of the two people—the other was my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley)—who realised in advance that there would be implementation problems. I remember my right hon. Friend talking to Conservative Members—he

[Mr. Oliver Heald]

alluded to this earlier—about the difficulties that there would be with fathers, but we were all surprised at the reaction to implementation.

The proper responses were made to the legitimate concerns raised after the initial implementation problems became clear. Too many people refused to pay and there was a co-ordinated campaign to disrupt the administration of the agency, but significant progress has been made. For example, 186,000 non-paying parents have been traced using the CSA's new specialist tracing service; new DNA tests have increasingly been used, and 2,000 cases of paternity were established in the first 10 months of the financial year 1996-97; and there has been a large increase in deductions from earnings orders—almost 50,000 in the first 10 months of the financial year 1996-97. In addition, interest is now payable on debts, and debts can be lodged in the county court register, affecting credit ratings. The departure system allows the agency for the first time to take account of life style and other evidence that contradicts a parent's claim, enabling proper settlements to be made. Those measures are working.

The agency is more efficient and improving. Recently, the agency collected four times as much as in 1994—a 55 per cent. increase on the previous year; 80 per cent. of assessments were accurate to the nearest penny; and 98 per cent. of payments were passed on within 10 days. We should recognise the progress that has been made. Some hon. Members were saying that the agency is worse than it was, but it is not. When Baroness Hollis visited the agency in Dudley, she rightly expressed her pleasure at the progress that has been made. She said:

"the CSA has made enormous progress in the last year. Around 80 per cent. of assessments ... are now correct to the last penny".

and repeated the statistics that I have just given. She went on to say:

"This improvement owes much to the expertise and diligence of CSA staff, and I am grateful to them for their continuing efforts in often difficult circumstances.

I have been impressed by the determination of CSA staff to build on recent successes, and am confident they will continue to provide an increasingly efficient, accurate service."

There is a great contrast between those comments—with which I agree, as would any objective person—and what the Labour party says in its policy document "Children First" and some of the comments that we have heard today. The document calls the agency "unsuccessful" and says that fundamental reform is required to

"create a system that is fair, efficient and puts children first."

What are those fundamental reforms? We have heard many different points of view in the debate. Some people have called for the establishment of a family court. I practised in family courts when they dealt with child maintenance and I do not think that we had a good track record.

We must support the structure that is in place—the Child Support Agency—and make it work better year on year, as has happened over the past two years. When the Government talk of fundamental reform, do they mean fundamental reform or do they mean making the present system work better? When answering that, the Minister might like to bear in mind the fact that the hon. Members for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer), for Northavon, for Croydon, North, for Normanton, for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), and for Brighton, Kemptown (Mr. Turner) have all called for fundamental reform. I should like to know whether that is what the Minister wants.

In all the debates that we have had on the Child Support Agency during my time in Parliament, since 1992, the Labour position has been that there must be an income support disregard. Today, the Secretary of State made what might be a pledge—a possibility? a probability?—that perhaps, in due course, when circumstances allow, there might be a disregard. However, we have heard strong pleas from the hon. Members for Croydon, North, for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, for Northavon and for Kemptown, among others, for the maintenance disregard. Is that Labour policy? Is there a guarantee, or is it a pious hope for the future?

All those who have spoken have said that we must improve the efficiency of the Child Support Agency. Its targets for 1997-98, established by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden, are set out on page 19 of the business plan published in March this year. Are any of those targets to be changed? The Secretary of State said that more than 500,000 assessments would be carried out in 1997-98. The target in the business plan is 525,000. That is not a change. What changes are there? Is it just the new telephone system, or is there more to the issue than meets the eye?

Those in the Labour party are serial reviewers. The Commission on Social Justice reviewed all aspects of social security. When its report was published, the new Prime Minister described it as the best piece of work since Beveridge, then dropped it. He then asked the right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith), who was the shadow Secretary of State for Social Security, to review the whole area and to think the unthinkable. He went away and thought. Perhaps it was unthinkable, but it was all dropped.

The Secretary of State has now come forward with review on review. I do not think that there is anything that she is not reviewing. About a week ago, I noticed one Labour Member below the Gangway whistling the tune of "I'm reviewing the situation". The interesting thing about Ron Moody's song in the musical "Oliver!"—

Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford, South): Oliver Heald.

Mr. Heald: Oliver is a good name. If the hon. Gentleman would like to join Oliver's army, he will find it on the Opposition Benches.

The Minister for Welfare Reform (Mr. Frank Field): Sing the whole song.

Mr. Heald: I could sing some more, but I am not going to. The final line is:

"I think we'll have to think it out again."

I hope that the Labour party does not review and review and review—and then review some more. It is good to talk, but we want to know what Labour Members are talking about.

2.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Keith Bradley): I have listened with great care and interest to this extremely serious

debate. I thank all hon. Members for their excellent contributions, which were extremely helpful and well thought out. They fully justify the fact that we have called this debate so early in our period of administration. The contributions we have heard today will clearly form part of our thinking on reform of the Child Support Agency. The quality of the contributions has been a tribute to Parliament.

It is important that I reiterate what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said at the beginning of the debate. We are firmly committed to the principle that lies behind the child support scheme—that children are entitled to the emotional and financial support of both parents. By emotional support, we mean that fathers should provide much more than just their money. They should provide their time, their attention and their care. By financial support, we mean that absent fathers must also fulfil their responsibility to contribute to their children's upbringing to the extent that they can afford.

The child support scheme was introduced because the old court system was failing lone mothers and their children in that it failed to get absent fathers to pay proper and regular maintenance for their children. As a result of that failure, there was all-party support for the previous Government's aim for the child support scheme, which was to get maintenance flowing through to the children. That is still our objective.

The difficulties encountered by the agency in its early days are well documented. During today's debate, many hon. Members have told us about their constituents' problems in dealing with the Child Support Agency. It was interesting that the previous Secretary of State had realised that there would be problems. It was a pity that he spoke only to his Conservative colleagues about them and that he did not bring his concerns to the House at that early stage so that we could be aware of his anxieties right at the start.

Mr. Lilley: The hon. Gentleman may recall that the then shadow Secretary of State, after discussions with me, was urged to invite the head of the agency to address Back-Bench Labour Members. I do not have the details, but I believe that he did so that those hon. Members would be aware of what was involved.

Mr. Bradley: I hear clearly what the former Secretary of State says. My point, however, was that he should have shared those concerns with the House so that we could have had a proper debate, after which some of the problems could have been dealt with.

There have been many excellent contributions to the debate; it would be quite impossible in the time available to address all the issues raised. However, I assure all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate that their views, which will be properly recorded in the *Official Report*, will be addressed. I give an assurance that where substantive cases have been raised, they will be looked at carefully. Hon. Members will get a response on each case so that they know that their contributions today have been taken seriously and will be part of our fundamental look at the workings of the agency.

I congratulate the three hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today and I welcome the comments made by the shadow Minister on them. First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) for his excellent contribution, and for his wonderful articulation of Labour values and the way in which they relate to child support and the needs of children generally. His explanation of social justice, rights and responsibilities was truly magnificent, and I welcome the five points on reform of the Child Support Agency. Clearly, they will be taken into account. The errors in dealing with cases that he described were not excusable and we shall look carefully at them so that we can restore public confidence in the Child Support Agency.

The hon. Member for Northavon (Professor Webb) made a welcome and thoughtful speech. I agree with the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) that it brings great value to our debates if hon. Members making their maiden speeches contribute to the debate.

Professor Webb: I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way and for his kind comments. I am particularly interested to hear of his offer to investigate the constituency cases that were raised, but that raises a question in my mind as to whether that sets a precedent. Rather than my endless correspondence with the head of the Child Support Agency, perhaps I should correspond with the Minister. Perhaps he will advise me.

Mr. Bradley: I was stating that we will look carefully at issues raised by hon. Members who have taken the trouble today to contribute to the debate and bring their issues to the House, as they are good examples that will form the framework of our thinking in the future.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) on his excellent contribution and on his wonderful tribute to his predecessor, Willie McKelvey. It is very good to hear of his recovery to health, as we were all very worried about his illness. Again, I send him the good wishes of the whole House for a happy and healthy retirement. My hon. Friend made some excellent points, which will be noted. We shall respond to particular cases accordingly.

Speeches made by other Back Benchers have been equally valuable. In these debates, the experiences of hon. Members of what is going on outside the House are important. Hon. Members brought into our debate the reality of what is going on outside. It is a tribute to the way in which today's debate has been conducted and gives a real flavour of what is happening in our advice bureaux and constituencies. It is very easy for a new Administration quickly to become remote from the real world. We want to ensure that all our policy thinking and development is based on reality so that we address the real issues that Members of Parliament confront.

There was no finer example of that than my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien), who has a good and long history of dealing with constituency problems about child support. He has diligently presented those problems to Parliament in the past. I pay tribute to him. He has brought a litany of problems to the House. Delays and lost correspondence are not acceptable. We have to ensure that we introduce a fast, efficient and effective administration to the Child Support Agency in the light of the problems that he identified.

Similarly, the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), in his welcoming remarks, raised several issues, particularly about backlog, which has to be addressed urgently, and about research, because

[Mr. Bradley]

quality research guides thinking in this area. I am well aware of the Bradshaw and Millar research. We will look at it again in the light of the points that the hon. Gentleman raised. It should be a valuable contribution to our thinking in future.

I always welcome the contributions to these debates that my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks) makes. He made a thoughtful speech. His expertise and knowledge of broader family support policies have always been a guiding principle in his thinking about child support matters, and they are welcome. It is a tribute to him that many of the Labour party's policies have been led in a direction of wider social policy and family policy matters. I note with great care the seven-point strategy that he developed in his speech. I shall pick out just two of his points. The first is how the agency has targeted soft targets, and how people have apparently been getting away with it. That situation has been reinforced by the way in which the agency has looked at those who have made an attempt to comply with it. Clearly, we must look at that problem and broaden the approach. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman spoke about developing a proper case work model so that, when people contact the Child Support Agency, they have regular and coherent contact with a particular officer. That is a valuable suggestion and we must take it seriously.

The hon. Member for North Essex made his usual Friday morning contribution to our debate. It is a great tribute, given the sparsity of attendance on the Opposition Benches. I noted the points that he made about the cases on which he based his experience and we shall take those into account.

We shall also take into account the contribution of the hon. Member for Taunton (Mrs. Ballard), who came up with a four-point plan. I think that the plans suggested this morning ranged from one to seven-point plans, but they all contained welcome suggestions and many made reinforcing points about a range of issues. As we set out on our review of the Child Support Agency's work, it is important that those points have been made before the House so that we can form our thinking in the future.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's kind comments. Will he acknowledge that, in the business plan published before he was appointed to his present post, targets were set? Does he think that those are the right targets? If not, what targets will he now set? Given that a whole day's debate has been devoted to this subject, that is what we expected to discuss.

Mr. Bradley: Now that we are responsible for the Child Support Agency, it is essential to ensure that the targets are met and that the agency is effective and efficient in the future. We are determined to carry out that task to the best of our ability.

Mr. Lilley: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman's reply to my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), but it is in flat contradiction to the central point made by the Secretary of State, which was that proper targets had not been set. *[Interruption.]* I shall give the hon. Gentleman time to receive his briefing from the Secretary of State. He appeared to say that the right targets had been set and that the Government must meet them.

Mr. Bradley: The point that I was trying to make was that the targets that are set must be achieved. We must give the public confidence that the Child Support Agency is improving. That is our intent.

I shall comment—briefly, because time is fast running out—on the other contributions from Back Benchers, because they are all worthy of comment in winding up the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) made an excellent contribution. She said that it is not acceptable for maintenance not to be paid and that delays in assessment and collection of maintenance cannot be tolerated. We must ensure that there is a secure base for mothers to receive that maintenance so that they are absolutely clear about their circumstances.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) said that we need to ensure fairness within the system. He said that the agency was not performing as well as it had in the past. It is our responsibility to ensure that that does not happen. We must improve the agency and make it more efficient and effective.

Mr. Heald: The Under-Secretary has welcomed the comments made in the debate, but many were calling for fundamental reforms or the scrapping of the agency. Is he prepared to contemplate that?

Mr. Bradley: As we said clearly, we are setting out on the review of what needs to be done. Today's debate is the start of the process of listening to the wide range of views in the House. We shall make an assessment of those views and, in due course, make our proposals. It would be quite wrong to initiate this debate, allow hon. Members to contribute and then prejudge its conclusion by announcing the outcome. I do not intend to do that.

Others who spoke included my hon. Friends the Members for Romford (Mrs. Gordon), for Brighton, Kemptown (Mr. Turner) and for South Swindon (Ms Drown), who all made excellent speeches which I welcome. I particularly welcome my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon's point about bringing in the work of other agencies, and she mentioned money advice agencies. Clearly, we can use the interaction with agencies dealing with family debt and other problems to ensure that there is a consistent approach and that the CSA, as a consequence, can work more effectively. We shall consider her proposal.

I welcome the response of my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon to the extra telephone line proposals. It is essential that clients of the CSA have the opportunity to make effective contact with the agency but, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, at an appropriate time which leads to an effective outcome of the call. That is why we are looking at increasing the number of telephone lines and adding out-of-hours services, which will start to address the issue. My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon brought to the attention of the House a particular case. We shall look at it, because if the circumstances she described are correct, it is not acceptable.

One other general point concerns complaints. There is a new impartial complaints investigation system, and it has been said that the outcomes of investigations should be reported to the House. We need to consider that extremely seriously. However, the fact that the system has

had to be set up is a mark not of success but of the failure of the system. The fact that so many cases have had to go to the ombudsman, and the chaos that that has caused, should not be seen as a great triumph. It is an admission of the failure of the previous system, but I hope that it will lead to more effective scrutiny of those complaints.

There is no doubt that the introduction of the child support system was beset by difficulties, not least the disappointing performance of the agency, but I can assure the House that work is already in hand to improve the agency's services further. Since she took up her post in April 1997, Mrs. Boardman, the new chief executive, has announced a number of initiatives to examine the agency's activities, including continuing action on the way in which the CSA establishes contacts with its customers.

I have alluded to the CSA making earlier telephone contact to help absent parents fill in forms, answer queries and arrange maintenance payments earlier to try to reduce arrears. The agency is also looking at the way in which it handles inquiries and complaints. The chief executive is examining the organisation and structure of the CSA's operations to see whether they represent the best way of meeting the needs of customers.

I recognise that the CSA has a long way to go and that improvements must continue. We must ensure that the agency provides as efficient and effective a service as possible. We must ensure also that absent fathers are not given any excuse not to comply with the agency's demands and pay proper maintenance for their children.

While some absent fathers have encountered genuine hardship as a result of the CSA's activities, many others have simply tried to wriggle out of their liabilities. My right hon. Friend gave an extraordinary example of that earlier, and that behaviour is not acceptable. In short, this nonsense must stop. Under this Government, fulfilling parental responsibilities will be, not an option, but a fact of life for absent fathers. Lone mothers need regular maintenance, and have a right to it, as a means of helping them off benefit and back into work.

Child support is about ensuring that children receive their income. As I have stressed this morning, in the coming months we shall look closely at all aspects of child support and all aspects of the workings of the agency.

It being half-past Two o-clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 26th June, Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Community documents) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Secretary Marjorie Mowlam relating to the draft Appropriation (No. 2) (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, and the Speaker shall put the Question not later than three hours after the start of proceedings thereon.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

PLANT VARIETIES BILL

Ordered,

That, in respect of the Plant Varieties Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Ordered,

That the Order [17th June], That the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit (General) Amendment Regulations 1997 be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation, be discharged.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

Telecommunications Masts

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

2.30 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I am grateful for this opportunity to raise again on the Adjournment of the House the subject of telecommunications masts and planning guidance. The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford)—whom I welcome to his new position—may not be familiar with the previous debate, although I drew his officers' attention to it. I last raised the matter on 7 February this year, and I shall not rehearse that speech now. However, I shall summarise the difficulties that we face in my constituency and in the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), who wishes to associate himself with my remarks. He apologises to the House for not being present as he is attending to constituency matters.

The nub of the issue is as follows. It has been the Government's long-standing policy to promote a coherent network of mobile telecommunications across the country. Initially, that network was concentrated in areas of high population where planning issues regarding conservation of the countryside were not pressing. However, as the networks of telecommunications providers, such as Orange and BT Mobile, have been extended into more sensitive areas, the needs of the telecommunications systems have started to conflict with the Government's priorities regarding conservation of the countryside.

I extend this explanation to the Minister in a bipartisan spirit. I am sure that he agrees with expanding telecommunications for many reasons, including safety, assisting economic development and improving bad communications in rural areas during times of bad weather and so on. However, he will agree also that the Government have a responsibility to preserve the countryside.

My constituency comprises the Essex side of Dedham vale, which was made famous by Constable's great paintings. The skies above our heads that he painted are virtually unchanged today. However, we are confronted with the possibility that those views will be marred by stark vertical structures that will be erected in prominent places in order to achieve good coverage. Effective communications require line of sight between the aerial and the mobile telephone. There has been much discussion with the telecommunications companies, with the local planning authority—Colchester borough council—and Babergh district council. I thank the telecommunications companies, because they have taken great trouble to see me to explain their difficulties.

The nub of the issue is that there has been a planning inquiry involving an especially sensitive site. The area is designated as one of outstanding natural beauty and the site chosen is just outside the boundary.

On 7 February, I sought to secure an assurance from the then Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, a south London Member—who is now my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford)—on what would be the priority in the sort of case to which I am referring. The then Minister was, of course, restricted from making any specific comments about a case still coming through the system. My hon. Friend, however, gave me one extremely useful assurance. He referred to planning policy guidance note 8, issued by the Department of the Environment, which specifically advises

"that those should be formulated"—

that is a reference to plans—

"having regard to the need to protect the best and most sensitive environments. While such established planning policies that have been the subject of public consultation form the basis for decision-making, other material considerations will come into play on a case-by-case basis. Visual amenity is one such consideration and the visibility of a mast from a designated area, such as an area of outstanding natural beauty, can be a material consideration in relation to both prior approval determinations and full planning applications."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 1997; Vol. 289, c. 1322-23.]

That is clear. That seemed to be the then Minister placing his interpretation on PPG8. In any event, the note is only guidance and does not provide a binding, decisive factor to be taken into account in the mind of an inspector. That was before the public inquiry.

During the public inquiry hearings, I put a question to the Minister of State, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on 3 June. I asked about PPG8 and asked him specifically to reiterate the assurance that I have read to the House. The Minister kindly said:

"I shall ensure that my Department corresponds with him"—

that is me—

"on the findings."

The Minister was referring to the findings of the inquiry. He declined, of course, to comment on the particular inquiry. He added:

"I shall consider seriously any results that I receive."—[*Official Report*, 3 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 177.]

The first purpose of the debate, obviously, is to try to extract the original assurance that I was given before the general election. The second is to ensure—I am seeking an assurance from the Minister—that the Minister is prepared to call in. The planning process is confusing because I understand that the planning inspector has the power, already delegated to him by the Secretary of State, to determine the application. I ask the Minister to provide clarification. If he can do so, that will be helpful. At some stage, however, the Secretary of State must have the power to intervene on the findings.

I want to be reassured that if the findings are against the borough council, against the objectors and in favour of development in a very sensitive area, the Secretary of State will do all within his legal power to ensure that the application does not proceed any further.

I accept that perhaps we are talking about the best of a bad job in the circumstances. The structure will be visible from certain areas and it will be prominent. The danger is that a precedent will be set, and the Minister might be able to address himself to the general point rather than the particular points of the application.

A precedent will be set. The Council for the Protection of Rural England, for example, is watching the outcome of the inquiry carefully. The question is which takes precedence: the urgency of extending mobile telecommunications coverage, or our priceless natural heritage?

There is an obligation for the operators to remove the masts if they are no longer needed, but once the masts are installed, they will be too convenient to take down. They will be there for the duration, and it will be impossible for us to go back.

I ask the Minister to reflect on the fact that the relevant technology is developing rapidly. The ability to cover areas discreetly rather than with prominent telecommunications masts is improving. I doubt whether satellite communication will take over; that is not the way in which the current technology seems to be heading, but who knows what the future holds? Twenty years ago, who would have thought that so many people would have mobile telephones?

It is most probable that the use of smaller aerials covering smaller areas will become the accepted practice in sensitive areas. One of the companies whose representatives came to see me subsequently sent me a picture of a rather unlikely-looking tree, which was an aerial in disguise. I am not sure whether that is the answer. It looks like a tree that has had its top blown off. That is the general shape—I am forbidden to use visual aids in the Chamber—and one can imagine a mast being concealed in that structure. Other options include concealment in a flagpole or even in roadside signs. That would seem the appropriate development in a sensitive area such as Dedham vale and other special areas, national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty.

If it means waiting, and that we do not have exactly the coverage that we would like for all the networks in that area for a period, that would be a reasonable price to pay for maintaining an important part of the countryside.

I am told—this came out in discussions during the inquiry—that the test for positive coverage is not whether one can receive a reasonable signal from a hands-free mobile telephone installed in a car, but whether one can receive a reasonable signal on a hand-held telephone in a vehicle. Most of the companies have a disrupted signal over most of the Dedham vale, but it is not a complete black spot in the networks.

It seems a reasonable request that the Secretary of State should carefully examine this case for the precedent that it will set. One company has already told me that it will examine other spots in the valley where it could establish further masts to improve coverage, for which the present case will provide a precedent. That must apply to many other sensitive areas in many other parts of the country.

I hope that the Minister will reiterate the assurance that was given before the general election. I seek an assurance that, within the powers of the Secretary of State, all means will be used to ensure that that precedent is not set. That is what I ask on behalf of my constituents. I cannot emphasise enough how many and how strong the representations on the matter have been. Representations have been made to me not just by local people, but by national organisations. I hope that at the end of the process I shall be a smiling and happy Member of Parliament, along with my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk.

2.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) on his success in securing a second Adjournment debate on this subject within a few months, and thank him for his kind words of welcome to me in my post. I hope that I shall be able to let him leave the Chamber, if not with a radiant smile on his face, at least with the look of a man who has made progress and feels that the debate has been worth while and positive.

I listened with interest to what the hon. Member had to say about planning for telecommunications masts. I appreciate his concern for the landscape in his constituency, especially in the Stour valley and Dedham vale. As he rightly said, the vale provided a great deal of John Constable's inspiration. It is an area that I know well, have frequently visited and enjoy enormously. I fully support his comments about its considerable quality as part of the English landscape. Part of it is now designated an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, we have an established system for taking decisions on planning applications and appeals that come to the Secretary of State. These are based on locally prepared development plans, whether they be structure plans, local plans or unitary development plans. The public are involved in plan preparation. The local planning authority consults on draft plan proposals before it finally adopts them. Planning decisions are then taken on the basis of the plan unless, to use the words of the 1990 Act,

"material considerations indicate otherwise".

The hon. Gentleman mentioned a particular planning inquiry associated with potential mast development in his constituency. As he will expect, at this point I should make it clear that it is not appropriate for me to comment on the merits or otherwise of that or, indeed, any particular case. To do so might prejudice any future consideration of cases, including this case, that may come to the Secretary of State for decision. So the comments that I make will inevitably be of a general nature. Nevertheless, I hope that they will be helpful.

Planning policy guidance notes set out national policies on different aspects of planning. They provide the context for the local plan making that I have described. Local planning authorities must take their content into account in preparing their development plans. The guidance that they contain may also be material to decisions on individual planning applications and appeals. The hon. Gentleman made the point that it was only guidance, but I should stress that local authorities have to have regard to the guidance and that if they disregard it they can be challenged. Planning policy guidance note 8, which was last revised in December 1992, fulfils that function in relation to telecommunications. The general planning policy set out there is exactly as the hon. Gentleman stated in his speech. He accepts, and I endorse this, that this is an area of bipartisan agreement.

The policy is to facilitate the growth of new and existing telecommunications systems while meeting environmental objectives. These include well-established national policies for the protection of the countryside and urban areas. We want to facilitate the growth of telecommunications systems. Accessible and cost-effective communications systems have a significant role to play in the development of the economy nationally, and indeed in regional and local regeneration. This must not be done, however, at the expense of the environment.

PPG8 spells out a commitment to the environment in the context of telecommunications development. It confirms the need when considering proposals for

[Mr. Nick Raynsford]

telecommunications development to take account of national policies for the protection of designated areas, both urban and rural. I refer here to the sort of environments found in conservation areas, national parks and, crucially in relation to the hon. Gentleman's concern about his constituency, areas of outstanding natural beauty. The national policy considerations that should be taken into account in relation to such areas are set out in full in other PPGs. The PPGs form a composite series of planning guidance. With regard to areas of outstanding natural beauty, PPG7 on the countryside states:

"In general, policies and development control decisions affecting AONBs should favour conservation of the natural beauty of the landscape. In all cases the environmental effects of new proposals will be a major consideration".

I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman the first assurance that he sought, that the undertaking given by the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford)—I, too, had to check the constituency—is valid. Visibility from an area of outstanding natural beauty can be a material consideration in relation both to prior approval and to full planning applications. I will outline the distinction between those in a moment. The assurance that the hon. Gentleman sought is there. I confirm that the visibility of a mast from within an area of outstanding natural beauty is a factor that can and should be taken into account.

In planning for the roll-out of telecommunications networks, which manifest themselves particularly through the installation of masts and antennas, we are seeking to balance the different interests involved.

The hon. Gentleman will already know this, but it is important that I should put it in context. Installations by licensed telecommunications companies—or code system operators—are governed by the Telecommunications Act 1984, as well as by planning legislation. The need to protect designated areas when telecommunications development is proposed is recognised under both licensing and planning legislation. Licences granted to code system operators under the Telecommunications Act may impose their own conditions designed to help protect these areas. The control of development under the Town and Country Planning Act is managed in a similar way. The installation of any mast in an area of outstanding natural beauty or other designated area as specified in article 1(5) of the General Permitted Development Order 1995 requires a full planning application to be made to the local planning authority concerned.

There is a different approach outside areas of outstanding natural beauty and other designated areas. For these, the order allows code system operators to carry out various types of telecommunications development, including the erection of masts up to 15 m in height, without the need to apply for planning permission. Masts over 15 m require a full planning application. That does not mean that local planning authorities cannot stop masts under 15 m in unsuitable locations. An operator wishing to erect a mast up to 15 m high must apply to the local planning authority for its determination as to whether it wishes to approve within 28 days details of the mast's siting and appearance. The authority can refuse approval to one or both of those aspects, if it considers that that is justified. There is a right of appeal to the Secretary of State if approval is refused. It is important that local planning authorities—I am not talking of the hon. Gentleman's authority but making a general point—make arrangements to enable them to process such applications effectively within the 28-day period.

PPG8 encourages local planning authorities to include in their development plans policies for the siting of telecommunications equipment such as masts. The plans should take account of the limitations imposed by the nature of the telecommunications network and technology, and of the need to protect the best and most sensitive environments. The number of plans that include such policies is increasing. Local authority plans generally apply national landscape conservation policies on a site-specific basis and often include policies for locally defined areas of landscape importance. That could include an area adjacent to an area of outstanding natural beauty as well as the AONB itself. Once they have been adopted, those policies provide the starting point for decisions on planning applications for masts and related telecommunications development by the local planning authority concerned, or on occasion, by the Secretary of State determining an appeal.

Other material factors to be considered alongside the plan include, as PPG8 points out, the significance of the proposed development as part of a national network. Material considerations can also include visual amenity and the potential for screening the proposed development. The visibility of a proposed mast from within and without a designated area such as an AONB can be a material consideration. The planning arrangements that are in place are intended to offer the basis for rational and balanced decision making on the siting of developments such as masts.

Overall, it is desirable to keep the number of telecommunications masts to a minimum, whether operative or redundant. In the latter case, both the telecommunications code and the operator's licence obligations require that apparatus must be removed when redundant. Provisions under the planning Act reinforce that approach. It is a condition of the General Permitted Development Order that redundant apparatus is removed. Local authorities may attach similar conditions to any planning permissions that they grant.

With proposals for new apparatus, licences that are issued to operators under the Telecommunications Act already include conditions requiring them to take all reasonable steps to investigate the possibility of mast sharing. PPG8 sets out the established policy on mast sharing. It attaches considerable importance

"to keeping to a minimum the numbers of radio and telecommunications masts, and of the sites for such installations. The sharing of masts will help achieve this, where practicable, as will the use of existing buildings to site new antennas."

That is a policy that we particularly subscribe to and wish to develop. We already have what amounts to a "sequential test", which applies predominantly to out-of-town shopping, but a similar approach exists in relation to telecommunications masts.

Paragraph 27 of the PPG advises that

"local planning authorities may reasonably expect applicants for large masts to show evidence that they have explored the possibility of erecting antennas on an existing building, mast or other structure".

We are considering how we can take that further. On the practice front, I understand that the operators are piloting new approaches in the use of existing structures. In future, we may see more antennae attached to electricity pylons,

for example. I appreciate that there are technical constraints that mean that mast sharing is not always a practical option. There are questions, too, of visual impact to be considered. Sometimes the installation of a further smaller mast may be preferable to additional antennae enlarging the silhouette of an existing mast. Those are just the sort of considerations about mast siting that can benefit from early discussions between operators and local planning authorities.

I hope that we can continue the progress that has already been made in matters of mast sharing and design. That must be in the interests of accommodating necessary telecommunications development, while at the same time minimising the impact of that form of development on the environment.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: I am hoping that the Minister will reach this point before he sits down. In these cases, what is the mechanism for the Secretary of State using his powers to overturn an inspector's decision? Is that a decision that the Secretary of State can make entirely at his discretion, or is it bound by the planning guidance that has already been issued? Without wishing to invite the Minister to comment on this case specifically, there would be deep disappointment if the Secretary of State were not able to take that action. It would suggest that the planning guidance is defective, and I have always been assured that it would give enough discretion to turn down the case in any event.

Mr. Raynsford: As the hon. Gentleman must understand, I cannot comment on that particular case. I hear what he is saying, but I hope that I can give him the assurance that he seeks. Where a matter is subject to an inquiry or appeal, the Secretary of State has the ultimate decision as to whether to agree the application or matter subject to appeal. It will, therefore, be a matter for the Secretary of State to decide on, which is why I cannot comment at all on that case; it might prejudice the Secretary of State's discretion.

What I can say—and I think that it is important to say—is that we are extremely conscious of the concerns expressed by the Council for the Protection of Rural England, which the hon. Gentleman referred to. It has published a report on telecommunications development expressing concerns, which we have read and considered closely. We are particularly concerned to develop policies that provide the sort of safeguard that I know he seeks, while at the same time not damaging the economic imperative for allowing a continuing development of the telecommunications network.

I accept entirely the hon. Gentleman's points about possible future technological developments. It seems unlikely that satellite technology will enable the replacement of antennae, but it is equally possible that there could be a move towards more and smaller antennae and that that, in turn, would give certain benefits. Difficult issues need to be addressed to achieve the right balance between the two, but we are considering the matter in a spirit of seeking to protect the countryside in a way that achieves the objectives that he has set out for his constituency. We are concerned to do that not just in respect of his constituency, but throughout the country, and I assure him that that is a high priority on the part of Her Majesty's Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 23 June 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Tourism Industry

1. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what is his Department's assessment of the impact of the European social chapter and the minimum wage on the tourism industry. [3083]

The Secretary of State for National Heritage (Mr. Chris Smith): Tourism, with its potential to generate employment, is one of the priorities that we have set for the Department. The evidence is that most employers and employees in the tourism industry support a minimum wage. Minimum wages and basic standards of employment, by creating a better rewarded and motivated work force, can help to improve business performance.

Mr. Blunt: In most cases, no one would challenge the statement that one wants a well-motivated work force. It is extraordinary that tourism is responsible for 5 per cent. of our gross domestic product and that 7 per cent. of the nation's employees work in the industry. The industry consists largely of small companies that need labour market flexibility above almost anything else. The Government have signed the social chapter and sold the pass on it, but, before they impose a minimum wage, I hope that the Secretary of State will assure the House that he will consult tourism representatives on its level.

Mr. Smith: First, I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House. Before the election, he made an unforgettable contribution to tourism in his Surrey constituency by telling the world:

"You could put up a donkey as the Conservative candidate for Reigate and it would win."

I welcome him to his place on the Opposition Benches. Of course I assure him that we will consult closely and carefully with the tourism industry about provisions for a statutory minimum wage. That is the whole point of having a low pay commission, which will draw together both sides of industry, and of consulting wisely so that we set a sensible rate for the minimum wage.

Mr. Skinner: Is my right hon. Friend aware that one of the reasons for our magnificent majority on 1 May was that these barmy Tories were daft enough to keep telling workers that they had to work for peanuts? It has nothing to do with the common market: it is about justice, and it is offensive to keep hearing these well-heeled Tory Members, probably with consultancies up to their ear holes, telling British workers that they cannot get about £5 an hour. That is the rate, isn't it?

Mr. Smith: I shall, of course, pass on the last part of my hon. Friend's question. He is right in the first part of his question. It is particularly interesting that Conservative Members and Ministers failed to understand the evidence that they commissioned. A Coopers and Lybrand and London business school report prepared for the Conservative Government in December concluded:

"The tourism and hospitality labour market faces the threat of a self-perpetuating vicious circle that is harmful to profitability and competitiveness"

as a result of low wages and poor morale in the tourist industry. Opposition Members have to understand that exploitative wages do not result in a well-motivated work force and good service for customers and visitors.

Mr. Fearn: I support a fair minimum wage, but it must be fair, especially in tourism. The Minister and I both went to the British Resorts Association conference and addressed the meeting. After that meeting, many delegates spoke to me and, I think, to the Minister about the minimum wage. They were quite worried, as are hoteliers in Southport in my area, about the fact that it must be fair. Will the Minister assure us that he will consult not only the tourist boards, but the British Resorts Association?

Mr. Smith: I assure the hon. Gentleman that, in coming to a conclusion about the level of the minimum wage, we will of course wish the low pay commission to consult widely not just with the tourist boards, but with the industry and the British Resorts Association. Indeed, I noted with interest that, in its 2 January edition, "Caterer and Hotelkeeper" concluded that 84 per cent. of industry staff and 65 per cent. of industry employers supported a statutory minimum wage.

Mr. MacShane: Is not the real question to ask: why do 14 million British tourists go on holiday in countries, principally in Europe, that pay a minimum wage and train their staff properly? If we had that level of pay and investment in this country, more of those people might stay at home. Is it not sad that the first act of the new Leader of the Opposition is to stuff his Cabinet with anti-Europeans, sending a message that they have learnt none of the lessons of 1 May? Will my right hon. Friend join me in inviting all Conservative Members to take their holidays in Britain this summer so that they will learn what nonsense they are talking?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the fact that this country has a substantial balance of payments deficit in relation to tourism—it totals some £4.5 billion a year. We cannot do much about the weather, but we can at least ensure that when visitors take their holidays in Britain, either coming from abroad or visiting within the country, they can

have a good quality experience and be treated well and with courtesy. A key of part of ensuring that is a well-motivated staff.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: Speaking as someone who does take holidays in Britain and not, like new Labour, in Tuscany, may I remind the right hon. Gentleman that achieving a well-remunerated and motivated work force does not require a statutory minimum wage or joining the European social chapter? I add to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt). The World Travel and Tourism Council estimates that the tourism industry and its associated activities account for as much as 12 per cent. of GDP. Above all, may I urge the right hon. Gentleman to resist the damaging effects of the social chapter and the minimum wage, and to maintain a commitment to deregulation? With that in mind, will he consult at the earliest opportunity my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), whom we welcome to his post, and who has only recently stepped down from chairing the previous Government's deregulation panel, whose advice on this subject will be warmly welcomed?

Mr. Smith: I am disappointed that, in her first foray on the Back Benches, the right hon. Lady seeks to defend the economics of exploitation—because that is precisely what low poverty wages are all about. I am sure that she has forgotten that a leading figure in the tourism industry, David Wood, chief executive of the Hotel and Catering International Management Association, said:

"We should accept the principles of a minimum wage and the social chapter because they would reposition the industry on level terms with others."

I agree.

Mr. Miller: I hope that, when my right hon. Friend enters into this consultation, he does not consult French Railways Ltd. which is now the owner of British Rail International, which had a role in promoting British tourism. Does he agree that that sale reflected the worst aspects of the previous Government?

Madam Speaker: Order. The question is about the minimum wage.

Mr. Maude: The Secretary of State says that the tourism industry supports the introduction of a minimum wage, but at what level does he believe that it supports a minimum wage? Does he accept that it must be set at a level either so low as to yield no benefit, or so high that it destroys jobs, as the chairman of the Low Pay Unit has said? Which of those two does the right hon. Gentleman prefer?

Mr. Smith: I warmly welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his position on the Opposition Benches. I look forward to many constructive debates and arguments with him, but I am afraid that he has picked the wrong argument in this instance. He points to the need to set a statutory minimum wage at a sensible level—every Labour Member accepts that. Not having statutory wage protection in place, while the rest of Europe and most of the rest of the developed world has, leads to the exploitation of the work force, to appallingly low pay and to a much poorer tourism industry. That is not the way forward, and we want to change it.

Film Industry

2. **Mr. Corbett:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has for encouraging the improvement of training and qualifications in the British film industry. [3084]

The Minister for Film and Tourism (Mr. Tom Clarke): The skills and talents of our work force are major assets for the resurgent British film industry. Further improving training and qualifications in the film industry, in the context of the Government's commitment to Target 2000, will be high on the agenda for the policy review group which I have recently announced.

Mr. Corbett: I thank my right hon. Friend for that encouraging reply. Will he assure the House that the policy review group will concentrate on the development of the skills base of the industry as well as look for opportunities under the Government's welfare-to-work programme?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is entirely correct to focus on the skills base and welfare-to-work scheme which are key Government objectives. One of the pivotal sub-groups of the group that Stewart Till and I will chair will deal exclusively with training. It will be chaired by Dinah Caine, who is greatly respected for her work as director of Skillset. We are determined that young people in the United Kingdom will be given the skills to share in the future of a dynamic British film industry.

Mr. Whittingdale: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that there has recently been a very thorough review of the British film industry carried out under Sir Peter Middleton? Would not it be more sensible to respond to the recommendations in that report before setting up another review?

Mr. Clarke: No, I do not agree, if only because Middleton dealt only with the issue of finance. Moreover, under the former Government, not only were there 18 film Ministers in 18 years but they ignored the recommendations of Lord Lloyd's report on film and those of the Select Committee on National Heritage chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman). The difference between the Tories and us is that we will listen. We have assembled some of the best talents in the British film industry to listen with us, and we will consider and implement their recommendations.

Tourism Industry

3. **Mr. Woolas:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will make a statement on the level of income earned by the tourism industry in the United Kingdom. [3085]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage (Mr. Tony Banks): In 1995, the tourism industry contributed £38 billion to the United

Kingdom's gross domestic product, equivalent to more than 5 per cent. of the total. The industry supports 1.6 million jobs, a number which could grow by up to 1 million in the next decade. We are working with the industry, the tourist boards, local authorities and others to enable the industry's full potential to be realised.

Mr. Woolas: Is the Minister aware of the potential for tourism in Saddleworth and of the proposed development for the museum there? Will he consider visiting us to see the beautiful culture of Saddleworth?

Mr. Banks: May I say—*[Interruption.]* I do know where it is. The friends of Saddleworth museum are legion in the House. During the by-election in 1995, it was one of the most fascinating places—some unkind people would say the only fascinating place—to visit there. If I were to go into Bottomley-speak, I could read out a range of grants that have been made, via the lottery, to my hon. Friend's constituency, but I know exactly what he is talking about—tourism is not only about the favoured sites, often located in places like London, but about all parts of the country with a great heritage which there are many reasons to visit. That applies to my constituency in the east end where the outfall sewer walk is one of the most favoured.

Mr. Green: Does the Minister accept that the lottery has been a boon to the tourism industry in many constituencies, with or without outfalls? Does he also accept that any attempt, such as those that he has made over the past few weeks, to interfere in the running of the lottery and the way in which grants are given is likely to result in an unacceptable amount of political control over lottery grants, damaging the tourist industry and many others that depend on the lottery?

Mr. Banks: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. Lottery money is the people's money because it is the people's lottery. When we produce our White Paper in the not-too-distant future, we shall consider those issues. We need to examine the distribution of lottery funding across the country, because there has been criticism of the way in which certain areas get what seems to be an unfair or disproportionate share. That is a serious issue. Lottery money is the people's money, and the people are entitled to value for that money.

Film Industry

4. **Mrs. Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what actions he plans to take to promote the British film industry in the next year. [3086]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department recently announced the setting up of a film policy review group, whose task will be to formulate an agenda for action for the film industry and for the Government's support to it. The aim of the group will be to double the availability of British films to British audiences and to help the film industry to achieve its full creative and economic potential. This morning, I was at Battersea power station to help launch the renovation project that will put 32 screens and 8,500 seats into a major new entertainment centre for London.

Mrs. Clwyd: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his speed in setting up the review and on his statement about Battersea power station. Does he agree that one of the major problems dogging the British film industry is distribution? France has twice as many cinemas as Britain. Many excellent British films are never seen in our cinemas. Will the review address that?

Mr. Smith: The review will address precisely that. It was important to establish the working group because the issue has not been addressed before. My hon. Friend is right to point out that we do not have enough screens. It is important to develop the availability of viewing. We must address the key issues on the distribution and exhibition of films, as well as on the stimulation of production. I have already begun discussions with the companies—most of them American—responsible for exhibition and distribution to see what progress can be made.

Mr. Rowe: During the review, will the Secretary of State do everything that he can to encourage the British film industry to resist the temptation, which appears to have lured film makers in other countries, to believe that the only way to make money from films is to include as much gratuitous violence, sex and other unattractive features of modern life as possible?

Mr. Smith: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns. The most successful British films of recent years have not gone down that road, but have been good, responsible films, which I am delighted to welcome.

National Museums

5. **Ms Ryan:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to abolish admission charges to national museums. [3087]

12. **Caroline Flint:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to abolish admission charges to national museums. [3095]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage (Mr. Mark Fisher): The Government believe that all members of the community should be able to enjoy our great national museums and galleries; they should be for the many, not just the few. We are concerned about the growth of charging and are reviewing present arrangements urgently.

Ms Ryan: I welcome such a review. As a pressing issue, I am sure that the Minister is aware that the British museum is being forced to consider introducing admission charges to help balance its books due to lack of funding from the previous Government. How do the Government plan to discourage that course of action and to ensure that local authority and university museums are not forced to do likewise?

Mr. Fisher: Of course, my hon. Friend is quite right that the national galleries and museums are in their current position because of the neglect and the hostile policies of the previous Government. She may be aware that the Secretary of State and I met the chairman and the director of the British museum recently. They made it clear on behalf of their trustees that they share the Government's policy of securing the widest possible access to the British

museum and to national museums generally. I am determined to undertake a review and ensure that our museums are available to the widest possible audience.

Caroline Flint: Will the Minister consider introducing free days, free passes or differential entry charges for our national museums? I draw his attention to the progressive policy of the Earth centre—a major project for the millennium in my constituency of Don Valley—where it is intended to introduce community days and, rather imaginatively, discounts for people who travel to the Earth centre by public transport.

Mr. Fisher: All the options that my hon. Friend rehearses can play a constructive part in widening access to good projects such as the Earth centre near Doncaster. Our review is examining all such options. I should emphasise, however, that the prime objective of that review is to secure free public access to our great national museums and galleries.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Does the hon. Gentleman intend to usurp the freedom of trustees? If he intends to give directions to trustees to allow free entry to museums—something that many of us welcome—does he accept that it is absolutely necessary for him to guarantee the funds that the museums will thereby lose?

Mr. Fisher: Of course the hon. Gentleman is right to say that those are decisions for the trustees. We shall be involving in our discussions trustees and directors of national galleries that are charging and those that are not charging, but the choice of whether to charge remains with the trustees.

Mr. Evans: While the Minister is carrying out a review to look into scrapping charges to museums, does he agree that we also have very fine theatres? Should not people who cannot afford to go to the theatre also be allowed to have the charges scrapped? Does he plan a review to look into that?

Mr. Fisher: No. The position of galleries and museums is not comparable with that of theatres. However, the hon. Gentleman will know that many theatres have excellent concessionary schemes. We will encourage that policy and we hope that it can be pursued more widely to ensure that the maximum number of people get into theatres.

Dr. Tonge: In view of the poor funding for schools and the lack of any substantial promises of more funding for schools, will the Minister give an assurance that school parties will never be charged admission to our museums and art galleries?

Mr. Fisher: We do not want anyone to be charged entry to national museums and galleries. The hon. Lady is quite right to emphasise the importance of education and schools policies as widening access to museums is not solely a matter of admission charges or the lack of them. We are working with museums on a code of best practice in which policies towards education and new technologies play an important part in truly widening access to museums and galleries.

Film Industry

6. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will make a statement on the membership and objectives of the body that he has set up to investigate the future of the British film industry. [3088]

Mr. Tom Clarke: The film policy review group—which my right hon. Friend and I have already mentioned—consisting of leading players in the British film community, will be co-chaired by myself and Stewart Till of Polygram Filmed Entertainment. The group's objective is to encourage the British film industry as a whole to achieve lasting success and to be competitive in the world marketplace.

Mr. Ross: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response and I welcome him to his responsibility for film, which acknowledges his long commitment to the British film industry. Is he aware of the on-going project in Dundee and Tayside to produce a film for the Indian film industry, and does he agree that the British film industry has the potential for job growth? Can he tell the House on which policy areas the review group will focus?

Mr. Clarke: The United Kingdom is attractive to film makers for important locations, such as Dundee, and for the talent and even creative genius of British film production. The film policy review group will consider how to make the most of the UK's assets by boosting the audience for British films and by attracting from overseas investment in our talent and facilities. The group will focus on six key areas: the broadening of the audience and the impact of improving access; increasing the market share of British films; developing skills and talents; improving the financial and fiscal framework; promoting exports; and attracting inward investment.

Mr. Fabricant: May I ask the Minister and the review group not to emulate the system in France, an approach that was mentioned a few moments ago? Is he aware that the reason why there are more screens in France is because French television is so appalling and that French films are allocated time on French screens? If one visits a French cinema, one finds it emptier than the Chamber today.

Mr. Clarke: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for suggesting that today we are concentrating on the exciting future of the British film industry. If we have not persuaded Opposition Members of the importance of the review group—which has excellent members whose objectives we will fulfil—I refer them, in all modesty, to the views of the *Financial Times*, which said, the day after I made the announcement:

"This is the most ambitious Government review on film since the introduction of the Eady Levy in 1950."

I welcome that opinion.

Ms Ward: I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments on the British film industry. Leavesden Studios, the largest and fastest growing studio in the United Kingdom, is in my constituency of Watford. The most recent James Bond film was made there and it is now home to the

Star Wars films. Does my right hon. Friend have any plans to visit Leavesden Studios and witness for himself this exciting new development?

Mr. Clarke: I believe that my hon. Friend will find confirmation in her mail today that I intend to visit her constituency this week and I look forward to meeting her there. I welcome her positive endorsement of a proper strategy for the future of the British film industry. I am sure that she joins me in rejoicing that, despite the Conservative party's neglect of training, the contribution of the National Film and Television school has meant that Nick Park, concentrating on animation, received three Oscars this year. That shows British genius and skills, and we are determined to build on that foundation.

Mr. Lansley: Is the Minister aware that the issues of finance for the film industry and the distribution of British films were covered by the Middleton committee? Will the Minister make a decision on the recommendations made as a result of that review before subjecting the film industry to another lengthy and wide-ranging review?

Mr. Clarke: I did refer earlier to the fact that the Middleton committee report, to which the previous Government paid not one whit of attention, will be considered with other recent reports by the review group. I am not prepared to invite a well-informed group, which will consider what is going in the British film industry, to reach a conclusion even before it has met.

I can promise the hon. Member that the Government will not delay; we are not reticent in our commitment to the future of the British film industry, culture and appreciation. I know that we have the overwhelming support of the British and European film industries.

Industrial Heritage

7. **Mr. Desmond Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what priority he attaches to the role of museums in preserving the industrial heritage. [3089]

Mr. Fisher: The industrial heritage is of immense importance to the understanding of our past. Museums and conservation agencies have a central role to play in its preservation.

Mr. Browne: Is my hon. Friend aware of plans for an industrial heritage facility in my constituency that will train young people in lacemaking skills using a unique pup lace loom that is part of the collection at the local museum, the Dick institute? Will my hon. Friend encourage such initiatives not only for museums, tourism and education, but for training young people in skills which otherwise might be lost?

Mr. Fisher: I am particularly pleased to have a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun, whose predecessor, William McKelvey, was a well liked and respected Member of this House who stood down at the election because of ill health. The House will be pleased that he is recovering his health and will be grateful if my hon. Friend can convey that message to him.

I welcome initiatives such as that at the Dick institute, which sounds as if it is a model of good practice in its understanding of the importance of our industrial heritage. We believe that heritage is a living thing of contemporary relevance; by conserving the industrial techniques of the past to provide training for young people for the future, the Dick institute project seems to meet that approach. Museums and other heritage projects have a particular contribution to make to Government projects such as welfare to work and the regeneration work of the regional development agencies. By using industrial skills to provide work for the future, this project demonstrates the potential of that approach.

Mr. Hawkins: I agree with the Minister that our industrial heritage is extremely important for tourism, but is he aware that great concern has been expressed at the Government's plans to reduce the amount available from the national lottery for such tourism projects as industrial heritage by abandoning the additionality principle, which his party supported in opposition when the lottery was introduced? Are not the Government determined to reduce the amount of lottery money available to heritage and tourism by using it as a substitute for the taxpayers' money that is being taken away from health and education?

Mr. Fisher: No, that is not the case, and the hon. Gentleman should look at our plans. There is no question of reducing the sums of money that now go to the lottery boards. The lottery review Bill will be concerned with distributing the additional sums of money from the Wednesday lottery and other lottery sources.

National Lottery

8. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what representations he has received calling for changes to the operation of the national lottery; and if he will make a statement. [3091]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have received eight representations from hon. Members and approximately 200 representations from others calling for changes in the operation of the lottery. An early-day motion on this issue, signed by 65 hon. Members, was put down two weeks ago. I will publish a White Paper next month in which we will set out our proposals for reform of the lottery, including how we intend to seek a competitive and efficient not-for-profit operator at the end of the current licence and how we intend to channel a portion of lottery funds into education and health-related projects, as we promised during the election campaign.

Mr. O'Brien: I thank my right hon. Friend for that constructive reply and congratulate him on his approach to the massive salary increases that the directors of Camelot awarded themselves. I support his view about finding a non-profit-making operator for the lottery. When considering the White Paper, will my right hon. Friend have regard to the fact that a good number of people throughout the United Kingdom would like the prize money to be distributed more widely to allow more people to have a win on the lottery? On the distribution of money

for good causes, will he consider helping the many old people's organisations in small communities that are suffering because they have lost their headquarters?

Mr. Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. I can indeed assure him that I am anxious that, increasingly, the money from the various lottery distributors should go to small-scale, grass-roots, neighbourhood community projects to help people in their local communities. That is beginning to happen and I hope that we can build on it.

Mr. Brooke: What is the Secretary of State's current definition of the arm's-length principle?

Mr. Smith: The definition of the arm's-length principle is that the Government do not make decisions directly about the allocation of individual grants.

Mr. Barnes: Grants have often been distributed unreasonably—some areas have suffered quite badly as they have not been able to obtain them. One of the characteristics of the grants is that they often go to conurbations rather than other areas. Might there be a case for saying that more money should be available in the National Lottery Charities Board area rather than some of the other areas such as the millennium fund, so that more, smaller bodies can qualify, such as pensioner organisations?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right to identify the valuable work that the National Lottery Charities Board has been doing in recent months to target small-scale grants to small organisations. I very much welcome that. In the next year or two, of course, one question that will fall to be decided is what will happen when the millennium stream of funding comes to an end. We will certainly welcome representations on what should happen after that point is reached, not merely from hon. Members on both sides of the House but from people throughout the country.

Mr. Maude: The Secretary of State will have seen the independent report, quoted in the papers on 6 June, by TLF publications, which shows that the national lottery gives a greater proportion of its proceeds to good causes and in tax than any other lottery in the world and is, therefore, by the agreed definition, the most efficient. Does he not understand that that factor may be associated with the lottery's being run for profit? Does not his determination to switch in later years to its being run by a not-for-profit organisation mean that he is not remotely interested in how much money is raised for good causes, but is interested simply in removing people's ability to make a profit?

Mr. Smith: No, I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman is not correct. It is precisely because I am interested in maximising the revenue for good causes and ensuring that money is not wasted in any way—be it on unnecessary profit or anything else—that I am anxious to seek a not-for-profit operator. I am sure that it is also precisely because of that that Camelot, among others, has already begun to discuss with us how we can best seek a not-for-profit operation of the lottery.

9. **Liz Blackman:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what recent discussions he has had with the lottery distribution fund boards. [3093]

Mr. Banks: My right hon. Friend met the chairman and chief executives of the London-based lottery distribution bodies on 3 June. It was the first in a regular series of meetings that, in the future, will also involve the bodies based in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The main topic for discussion was our plan for reform of the lottery.

Liz Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply. From what I have heard this afternoon, people in the region in which I live and the constituency I represent will be reassured to hear that the Government are reconsidering lottery fund distribution. On a different but related issue, when the White Paper is drawn up, can we also ensure that we monitor the types of schemes to ensure that they have broad public support and confidence—something which has not always been evident in the past?

Mr. Banks: I have looked at a list of the grants made in my hon. Friend's constituency: they amount to £468,000. There are some very good schemes indeed, such as Long Eaton United football club. I hope that it is prospering well—as, indeed, are most sportsmen and women under the new regime.

The east midlands attracts about 3.87 per cent. of the award value, which is definitely to the lower end of the distribution. The White Paper must and will address the concerns about lottery distribution where it has failed. One such concern is the regional discrepancies. Some awards have also been severely criticised, and we must review the reasons for that and deal with the problems. The dome, of course, is now a matter for the Dome Secretary.

Mr. Hogg: When the Minister has discussions with the fund distributors, will he please emphasise the importance of seeking new ways of channelling money to village halls and playing greens in rural areas?

Mr. Banks: It is at the smaller end of lottery grants that much benefit is accruing. A lot of attention focuses on the mega-grants, especially on large projects, some of which are in London—I emphasise that before someone behind me does it for me—but the question is a good one, and the distribution bodies should consider precisely the areas to which the right hon. and learned Gentleman referred.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Judges

28. **Mr. Lidington:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to change arrangements for the selection and appointment of judges. [3113]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The Government propose to consult later this year on the merits of a judicial appointments commission and whether one should be established.

Mr. Lidington: Since the Government's proposal to incorporate the European convention on human rights in domestic law will inevitably bring the judiciary into taking decisions that were hitherto regarded as political, will the Minister consider seriously whether senior judicial appointments should be made subject to a parliamentary confirmation process, perhaps involving a Select Committee hearing?

Mr. Hoon: That suggestion may be usefully received by those responsible for considering the Government's various proposals, but I emphasise that, above all else, the Government are committed to preserving the independence of the judiciary. We must ensure that our appointments system is based on selection on merit.

Courts

29. **Mr. Hinchliffe:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he has taken to ensure the availability of courts close to local communities. [3114]

Mr. Hoon: Magistrates courts are locally managed by magistrates courts committees under the Justices of the Peace Act 1997. Decisions concerning the future and number of magistrates courts in each area are for the relevant committee to take. A local authority that contributes financially may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure; the procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997. In the absence of an appeal, however, the Lord Chancellor plays no part in the process.

On the civil and higher criminal courts, the court service must constantly monitor and review the viability of its resources in the light of changing business needs and work load trends. Decisions on any proposals for change will be made by the Lord Chancellor, taking account of all the relevant factors.

Mr. Hinchliffe: In developing a new approach in his Department, will my hon. Friend consider the implications of Crown court closures in areas such as Huddersfield and Wakefield for court users, the local police and the legal profession? Will he consider proposals in West Yorkshire for amalgamation of the magistrates courts committees, because of the concern that that could lead to magistrates becoming even more remote from the communities that they serve?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his suggestions, but it is clear that each decision must be taken on its merits. Much will depend on the grounds of any appeal that is lodged, although there are clearly several themes that are common to all appeals: accessibility, of which my hon. Friend rightly emphasised the importance; the provision of modern facilities, such as facilities for the disabled; security arrangements for violent offenders; and separate waiting areas for defendants and witnesses. In addition, the Government are particularly concerned to reduce delays. It is important that we have courtrooms best suited to enable cases to be listed in a way that helps to achieve our aim of reducing delays in the criminal justice system.

Mr. Hogg: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees that, if the courts are to be useful to the local community, it is important that the court offices are kept open. In that context, he knows that there is a proposal to close the Sleaford court office. If that decision is finalised and there is then an appeal to the Lord Chancellor's office, I hope that the Minister can confirm that that appeal will be given serious and sympathetic consideration.

Mr. Hoon: Of course it will be.

Mr. Mackinlay: Will the Minister look into the case of Essex magistrates courts committee, which is embarking on a review of its courts? Essex Members have not yet been formally consulted. I hope that he agrees that we should be. Will he consider the arbitrary decision, without notice, to move the offices of Thurrock court to Basildon? Many people in Thurrock fear that that heralds a merger of the administration of the courts and of the courts themselves, which would then be based in Basildon. That would be unacceptable to the people of Thurrock.

Mr. Hoon: I emphasise, in relation to all these questions, that these are local decisions, taken locally and subject only to the rights of appeal prescribed in law. For example, magistrates courthouses are not Crown property but owned or leased by the paying local authority on behalf of the local committee. Only when there is an appeal against the decision of a magistrates court committee by a paying authority does the Lord Chancellor have any power to intervene.

Mr. Bob Russell: Does the Minister agree that the whole process has more to do with economics and saving money than with the distribution of justice? Does he agree that, particularly from an Essex perspective, the centralisation of courts, magistrates and witnesses means that local magistrates rarely make decisions on local cases? Is not that bad for local justice?

Mr. Hoon: I do not accept that the process is solely to do with economics. Economics is clearly an important factor in the decisions, but, as I said, we are also anxious to ensure that we have modern facilities. It is vital that we have up-to-date courts that can provide the range of facilities that are expected in the last part of the 20th century. Equally, I said that the Government are particularly concerned about delay. We must have court complexes that allow us to list cases in a way that best deals with the considerable problem of delay, especially in the magistrates courts.

Victim Support

30. **Mr. Bayley:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to improve the support given by the courts to victims of crime. [3115]

Mr. Hoon: Several initiatives are already in place. A witness service scheme run by the charity Victim

Support is in operation at each Crown court centre and offers practical and emotional support for victims and witnesses. On 13 June, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced an additional grant of £1 million to Victim Support. Consideration is also being given to options for establishing similar victim and witness support schemes in magistrates courts. All courts contribute to local service level agreements based on national standards of witness care, agreed by the trials issues group, to improve on the support and care of victims who are called to be witnesses.

Mr. Bayley: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply. I know that he has taken a close interest in the case of Peter Windass, my constituent who was murdered. Does he agree that the anguish suffered by Peter Windass's family was intensified by the insensitivity of the rules governing how the court service operates? For example, the family had to mingle with associates of a murderer in the public area of the court, and courts have no obligation to keep the family of a murder victim informed of progress in the case. Does he agree that if the criminal justice system fails to provide justice for the victims of serious crime, it is failing altogether? Will he undertake to consider the two points that I raised?

Mr. Hoon: I have read carefully my hon. Friend's speech during a recent Adjournment debate on that particular matter and I congratulate him on his constructive contribution to these important issues.

The Crown court centres at York and Sheffield, which were involved in supporting the family of Peter Windass, a homicide victim, were the origin of the complaint. The case was eventually heard at Sheffield which, at that time, offered poor public facilities. That may have led to the family's coming into contact with defence witnesses. The court is now housed in a purpose-built building with facilities to keep witnesses and their supporters separate from other court users.

This is precisely the kind of issue to which I referred a moment ago: it is crucial for the protection of witnesses and victims that we have modern, up-to-date court facilities. I will certainly undertake to look again at the issue if necessary.

Mr. Hawkins: When the hon. Gentleman is considering changes to the procedures on consultation with victims of crime, will he also undertake to liaise with the Home Secretary about whether those who are involved in the prosecution of a case should be able to consult more fully than they do at present with the families of the victims of crime, and with the victims themselves, before decisions on sentencing, or whether to abandon a prosecution, are taken?

Mr. Hoon: I shall ensure that that suggestion is passed on.

Legal System (Accessibility)

31. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he expects to bring forward proposals to make the legal system more accessible to potential users. [3117]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor has invited Sir Peter Middleton to review current proposals for reform of the civil justice and legal aid systems. He is to produce a preliminary report by September. The Government recognise the challenge in reforming legal aid provision—not only is the cost of legal aid escalating, but the percentage of households eligible for it has fallen. We are determined to create a system that achieves value for money for the taxpayer and high quality advice for the consumer.

Mr. Baker: Does the Minister agree that the most important purpose of any review must be to ensure that everyone has access to justice in the courts and that people are not prevented from seeking it by how much money they have in their pockets? That must come before any cost-effective review that the Government undertake.

Will the Minister also take the opportunity to confirm or deny the story on the front page of the *Daily Mail* today, which claims that legal aid will be abolished? I do not always believe that paper, but that is what it says on its front page. If he is unable to deny that suggestion, will he refute the idea of moves towards state-salaried solicitors, who would obviously not be independent of the Government?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman has asked a number of questions about legal aid, as he did at our previous Question Time, and tabled a number of written questions. I therefore thought that it might be instructive to examine precisely the hon. Gentleman's party's policy contribution on the subject. I have carefully scrutinised the Liberal Democrat manifesto which was issued before 1 May 1997. I must tell the hon. Gentleman that his party made no mention whatever of any kind of policy on legal aid. I hope that it will not be testing his party too much to invite it to develop such a policy, perhaps between now and the middle of September, so that Sir Peter Middleton and his colleagues might have the benefit of its suggestions on how we should tackle the problems associated with civil legal aid.

Mr. Streeter: Is the Minister aware of the deep disappointment felt by many at the delay in introducing the Woolf reforms, which is due simply to the decision to allow time for yet another Labour review? When, oh when, will this Government stop reviewing and start deciding?

Mr. Hoon: On the contrary: the Lord Chancellor has made it clear that he supports the spirit of Lord Woolf's recommendations. The Labour party made it clear in its manifesto before the general election that it was necessary to consider the proposals in the Woolf report and those on legal aid together. We did not believe, unlike, apparently, the Conservative party, that it was possible to deal with those issues separately. That is why Sir Peter Middleton will conduct a review of the civil justice reforms and those of legal aid simultaneously.

Bereavement Payments

32. **Mr. Dismore:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to review the statutory bereavement payment of £7,500 under the Fatal Accidents Acts. [3120]

Mr. Hoon: The Law Commission is currently conducting a comprehensive review of the Fatal Accidents

Act 1976 and plans to issue a consultation paper later this year. I expect that the consultation paper will cover damages for bereavement. That is, of course, additional to compensation that the courts can award to financial dependants of the deceased. Damages for bereavement is an important and sensitive matter. The Government will consider carefully what steps to take in the light of the consultation paper.

Mr. Dismore: Speaking as a personal injury lawyer, may I tell my hon. Friend that one of the most difficult things that we have to do is to advise the parents of a child killed tragically in an accident—perhaps mown down by a drunken driver—that their child's life is worth practically nothing. It is worth nothing if the child is over 18.

It will be several years before the Law Commission's project is completed. In the meantime, will the Lord Chancellor consider exercising powers under section 185 of the Fatal Accidents Act 1976 to uprate the figure, which has remained the same since 1991, and will he take a leaf out of the new criminal injuries compensation scheme limits, which are higher than at common law?

Mr. Hoon: I am well aware of my hon. Friend's considerable expertise in these matters. I sincerely hope that it will not be several years before the Law Commission report is published. Although it is important that the figure should be uprated, particularly to take account of inflation, I hope that my hon. Friend will accept that it is equally important for us to await the outcome of a consultation conducted by an independent Law Commission, which is examining the entire issue of fatal accidents claims, rather than simply picking out any one element of the material that the commission is considering. It would be wise to see the final results of the consultation paper before taking any specific decisions about uprating.

BILLS PRESENTED

Public Records (Amendment)

Mr. Norman Baker, supported by Mrs. Ann Clwyd and Mr. Richard Shepherd, presented a Bill to improve public access to public records, including records relating to the Sovereign and the Sovereign's family; and for related purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 30 January, and to be printed [Bill 27].

Police

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay presented a Bill to make provision to regulate the use of the term 'Police' and related terms; to amend the law relating to the powers of certain constables; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 13 February, and to be printed [Bill 28].

Orders of the Day

Local Government (Contracts) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

3.31 pm

The Minister of State, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I rise once again to move a Second Reading on an important issue, although I confess that it is no simpler than the Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill, whose Second Reading I moved last week.

I welcome the new members to the Opposition Front Bench. I heard of the appointment of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) as I was driving to the big Methodist meeting in Durham, and it confirmed my belief in the resurrection. We are pleased that he is here, as well as the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), who is resurrected in another manner.

The Government are committed to promoting the opportunities for public-private partnerships, which offer the opportunity for increased value for money in the provision of the services that national and local government need. They allow public service staff involved in providing core public services, such as health and education, to get on with delivering those services in the most suitable facilities, without being distracted from their main responsibilities by worries about facilities management.

The purpose of the Bill is to remove private sector concerns about entering into partnership deals with local authorities. Partnerships can help to resolve the conflict between short-term financial pressures and long-term cost-effectiveness. The lowest initial construction cost for a building, road or other facility does not guarantee the lowest total cost over its lifetime for the service that it provides. There can be cost overruns and delays during construction, and false economies at the early stage leading to higher running costs later.

Partnerships can ensure the best value for money, and prevent under-investment, in the provision of assets and services. At the same time, the whole-life costs and risks of ownership are not borne by the public purse.

Partnerships can also improve value for money, by maximising the scope for outside revenues. There are often opportunities for the private sector partner to earn additional revenue, by using the facilities that he has helped to provide, without detriment to their availability to the prime user. That is particularly relevant in the case of schools and other local authority buildings that may be used for only part of the day. If a private sector contractor sees scope for obtaining such revenues, he should be ready to bid a lower price to the main user.

We have done away with the burdensome requirement on central Government and the national health service to test every project for partnership potential. There has not been—and cannot be—any compulsion on local authorities to use private finance, as they are autonomous decision-making bodies. The choice will remain with them, and support for direct local authority investment will continue. Nevertheless, we shall give every help and encouragement to authorities that want to use private finance.

The Government have no set view about the form that partnership schemes might take. I want to encourage all sorts of partnership initiatives for improving the quality and the management of local authority assets and services, while ensuring value for money for local taxpayers. The Government want to see new schools: we want to see the buildings and assets that local authorities need in order to deliver services.

I hope to see ideas for innovative partnership schemes brought forward as a contribution to the debate on the future of public service delivery. I also want to build on the successful joint venture projects already in place—for example, the Manchester metro and the Kirklees stadium.

Various partnership schemes have already been identified as pathfinder projects under the sponsorship of the public-private partnerships programme—we know it better as PPPP—which was set up by the local authorities. Experience of those schemes will be fed into consideration of the future of our public services.

The Government are committed to ensuring that partnerships between the public and private sectors work. We have inherited from the previous Government a private finance initiative process that has caused delay and uncertainty for many projects. Our business manifesto included a 12-point plan for partnership to speed up that process and encourage the development of good public-private partnership projects. One of those 12 points was to enact any new legislation that is needed to ensure that public bodies have the full legal power to enter into contracts. A separate Bill to deal with stalled projects in the national health service is currently before Parliament.

To turn the 12-point plan into action, my hon. Friend the Paymaster General announced on 8 May that he had asked Malcolm Bates, chairman of the Pearl Group and former member of the private finance panel, to undertake a rapid review of current PFI and public-private partnership arrangements. Malcolm Bates's review was completed on 13 June, and the Paymaster General has today published his conclusions and the action that he intends to take to ensure the delivery of good partnership projects. One of the review's recommendations is to take speedy action to overcome the uncertainty regarding local authority powers to enter into public-private partnership contracts. The Bill before the House aims to achieve that.

High-profile court cases have led banks to fear that partnership contracts with local authorities may be found unlawful, and thus unenforceable. The banks would then suffer financial losses. In the Allerdale and Waltham Forest cases, contracts entered into by local authorities were found to be null and void because the authority concerned did not have the power to enter into them. Because the contracts were found to be void, the private sector had no recourse to the authorities for compensation and so found itself saddled with bad debts.

The schemes that led to those court cases had special features and they are unlikely to be replicated. Nevertheless, the cases have created a perception that providing finance for long-term partnership contracts with local authorities is high risk. That is a perception that we must overcome if public-private partnerships are to work

successfully in local government. We want to act quickly to dispel any doubts that there may be in the minds of potential backers of local authority partnership schemes. The Bill will achieve that. It clarifies local authority powers and protects contractors and banks if things go wrong.

The Bill does not disturb the fundamentals of existing legislation. It does nothing to alter the scope for contracts to be challenged under public law, by which I mean reviewed by the courts, for the protection of the taxpayer, or by local authorities' external auditors. It does nothing to undermine the long-standing powers of the auditor to question the lawfulness of local authority conduct or expenditure.

Discussions and consultations have shown that, to reassure contractors, banks and other lenders to contractors, the Bill needs to achieve two aims. First, it needs to make explicit the power of a local authority to enter into contracts of the sort envisaged in public-private partnership schemes. The Bill does that in clause 1, by making it clear that authorities' statutory functions confer power to enter into contracts under which assets or services, or both, are provided for the function in question. The Bill is not extending authorities' powers, but making explicit what was already implicit. It covers contracts directly or indirectly involved in discharging a specific function—for example, a contract that makes available a school building and one that provides IT facilities that are needed for the administration of council tax.

The Bill does not affect the ability of authorities to act in a manner that is incidental to their functions, as permitted by section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972. The Bill also does not affect authorities' powers to delegate their functions. There is already statutory provision under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 for orders to be made that allow local authorities to contract out functions. One such order is being prepared in connection with highways functions. Contracts in other service areas seem less likely to entail delegation, but departments could consider making analogous orders if necessary.

Therefore, the Bill clarifies the powers of local authorities to enter into contracts. It then provides a safe harbour, by protecting contractors and lenders if an authority is later found to have entered into an arrangement that is invalid. To achieve that, clauses 2 and 3 introduce a certification procedure for contracts of a description specified in clause 4. In essence, they are contracts for five years or more involving the provision of both assets and services. The issue of a certificate—but not its content—needs the agreement of other parties to the contract, because the legal rights of all parties are affected by the certificate, in ways that I shall now describe.

The certification procedure is similar in principle to that proposed under the National Health Service (Private Finance) Bill, but is achieved differently. That is because the large number of local authorities makes it impracticable for Ministers to certify contracts individually, as is proposed for the NHS. Also, such intervention by Ministers would weaken local authorities' responsibilities and accountability, and that is not the way in which we as a Government would wish to go.

The effect of clause 2 is that no one—including the authority, the contractor or any other party to the contract—may argue in private law proceedings that the certified contract is unenforceable because the local authority did not have the power to enter into it. However, clause 5 preserves the right of local taxpayers or the authority's external auditor to challenge certified contracts under public law through judicial review and audit-related proceedings. In a judicial review, the court already has the discretion to allow a contract to continue if that is in the public interest. Clause 5(3) gives the court an equivalent discretion in audit-related proceedings.

To meet the case where the court determines that a contract is to be set aside, the Bill provides for the enforceability of special terms agreed between the parties with that possibility in mind. It would be open to the parties to agree discharge terms that provide, for example, for an asset to be made available for use by the authority. Clause 6 makes clear the authority's power to agree discharge terms, and provides that the enforceability of those terms is unaffected by the setting aside of the main contract.

If the parties do not agree terms to deal with the possibility that the contract may be set aside, or if the court finds that such terms are themselves unenforceable, clause 7 provides that the local authority shall, nevertheless, compensate the contractor as if it had repudiated the contract. That is the ultimate long stop.

We have considered whether there should be a more exact parallel with either the "safe harbour" provisions in the Companies Act 1985 or those in the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. The latter say that any absence of a power shall not prejudice a person lending money to an authority.

However, such an approach would leave too many questions unanswered. The matters to be settled in respect of a partnership contract are much more complicated than those relating to a loan agreement. Therefore, we do not believe that the "safe harbour" provisions in the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 are sufficient.

Clause 1(2) confirms that, where a third party funds a contractor, the authority may enter into a separate contract directly with the financier, who could be a direct lender to the contractor or a person involved in other forms of finance, such as bond issues. Such a contract may allow the financier "step-in" rights, by which I mean an arrangement whereby the financier would be able to nominate a replacement contractor if, for example, the original contractor became insolvent. The protection of the certification procedure and discharge terms are extended to a contract with a financier.

The Bill will apply, in England and Wales, to all bodies covered by part IV of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and to probation committees and the receiver for the Metropolitan police district. It will also apply to Scottish local authorities as defined in the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973.

Secondary legislation will be subject to the negative resolution procedure in Parliament, except for regulations that define the type of contract that may have the protection of the Bill. For those regulations, the affirmative procedure is required.

As a separate matter, clause 9 amends the Justices of the Peace Act 1997, so that revenue grants may be made to local authorities to meet payments under partnership contracts in respect of magistrates courts. For technical reasons, the capital finance rules currently classify such payments as capital expenditure.

[Ms Hilary Armstrong]

The details of the Bill reflect discussions and close working with interested parties, including the Local Government Association, the public-private partnerships programme and lawyers representing banks and contractors. We have now begun further consultations on the coverage of regulations. If those consultations result in proposals for amendments to the Bill, we shall consider carefully whether to bring them before the House. There will be a third round of consultations on the details of the secondary legislation once the broad coverage of the regulations is established.

Prompt action is needed, because private finance schemes in the local authority sector have been slow in developing. Indeed, no scheme has so far reached the stage at which actual construction work has begun. The present system, for controlling local authority capital finance and the use of privatefinance for capital purposes, is laid down in the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and subsequent regulations. It is an ingenious and rigorous system. In its original form, it put big obstacles in the way of local authorities that wished to pursue partnership deals. Such deals would have counted as "credit arrangements", the full capital cost of which would have had to score up front against the authority's capital resources. Pressure on local authorities' capital resources was such that, effectively, partnerships in local government were a non-starter.

In 1995, the previous Administration began to amend the system to facilitate partnership arrangements. Last October, they made regulations that relaxed the requirement for "credit cover" on deals with the private sector that met a test of adequate risk transfer. Also last October, the then Government announced that revenue support would be available for local authorities' payments towards such partnership schemes. Offering that financial assistance was right, because the system of revenue support grant already helps local authorities to meet the costs to them of conventional borrowing. If they are to procure the use of assets through partnership arrangements, they will incur comparable revenue costs.

The then Administration announced revenue support for the past financial year to the tune of £50 million of investment costs, none of which was actually spent. They also announced support for £200 million of investment this year. The resources are available; we need to remove any obstacle to their being taken up.

This is a necessary measure. The previous Administration were committed to the private finance initiative, and I would expect Opposition Members to support the current Bill.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Opposition Members believe in public-private partnerships. The Minister is seeking to encourage private involvement in Government matters, but how would that work in practice? There is, for instance, a strong suspicion that private sector involvement in English Heritage's imaginative scheme to preserve Stonehenge and make it an exhibition caused it to be turned down by the Secretary of State for National Heritage. It is suspected that some Ministers do not believe in private sector involvement. Can the hon. Lady comment on that?

Ms Armstrong: I speak on behalf of the whole Government when I say that we do support public-private partnerships. The Bill deals with them in local government, and local government already has a proud record of effective public-private partnership deals that have been conducted in a manner different from the way in which, according to the former Government, private finance initiative deals have been conducted in the past.

The Bill is a specific short measure intended to address the problems that have arisen in the securing of contracts that have the confidence of both the public and the private sectors, and it is on that basis that we wish to act. I am afraid that other issues must be taken up with relevant Secretaries of State, but, as I have said, the Government as a whole are committed to effective public-private partnership arrangements.

I intend the Bill to be in force by November. Speed is important to minimise any delay in local authority projects where contractors want to hold back from entering into contracts until the Bill is in force, although it contains provisions that will allow it to bite on contracts entered into from the date of its introduction. I commend it to the House.

3.54 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I thank the Minister for her kind remarks. In reincarnated form, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) and I look forward to plenty of enjoyment as the hon. Lady and the Government face the consequences of dashed expectations among their local government supporters.

Although I have spoken in Committee, this is the first time that I have spoken in the House since my election on 1 May. I begin by paying tribute to the hard work of my predecessor, Mrs. Maddock, for her constituents following her by-election victory in the previous Parliament. She was my councillor when I was the Member for Southampton, Itchen and I now enjoy the responsibility of being her Member of Parliament. Her commitment to local government issues can best be judged by the fact that during the general election campaign, which ran in parallel with Dorset county council elections, many constituents thought, albeit mistakenly, that she was their county councillor.

When I was first elected as a councillor in 1974, the aldermanic system still operated and the person whom I defeated immediately became an alderman. People in Christchurch await with interest to know whether Mrs. Maddock will be appointed to the parliamentary equivalent of aldermanic status—membership of another place.

The Opposition support the generality of the Bill. I understand that we probably would have introduced a Bill in not dissimilar terms if we had been in government. The Bill complements the Local Authorities (Capital Finance) Regulations 1997, which were introduced by the outgoing Conservative Government to facilitate partnerships between local government and the private sector.

We welcome the Government's conversion to the private finance initiative. I am the first to admit that the Minister's conversion goes back many months if not years. In the case of the Secretary of State for Health, we await hard evidence that there has been such a conversion. When he was Labour's spokesman on the environment, he criticised the Conservative Government and

emphasised the limits of the PFI approach. Old Labour used to regard the PFI as the son of privatisation and, therefore, to be despised. However, it seems that such attitudes have changed and the Opposition welcome that.

The publication today of the conclusions of the Bates review of the PFI is encouraging. One of its conclusions states:

"The Government should take an early opportunity to make a confirmatory announcement of its commitment to PFI as one method of conducting successful public-private partnerships."

My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) questioned the Government's commitment to the PFI, and he can draw support from the implication in that conclusion from the Bates review that up to now the Government have not confirmed their absolute commitment to the PFI. The Minister for the Environment is quoted as having said on 16 May in relation to design, build, finance and operate schemes:

"I do think there are problems with DBFO. One of which is finance. The operator provides the money up front, but the payback period is very considerable and that is a constraint on future public expenditure."

The Minister was expressing the underlying Government doubts about the PFI. Far from reinvigorating the PFI, the Government have allowed it to drift for many weeks. Seven weeks after peremptorily sacking the chairman of the private finance panel, the Government have still not appointed anyone to take charge and drive the PFI process forward. There will now be yet more delay before a chief executive is appointed to head the new Treasury private finance task force. Only last week, the Minister of Transport announced, not to the House in a statement, which he should have done, but in a written answer, a moratorium on new road building projects, putting DBFO schemes at risk—so much for speeding up the PFI.

Today's announcement is yet another example of the Labour party behaving in government as if it were still in opposition, rearranging the deckchairs without making any substantive improvements. It beggars belief that the way to inject greater urgency into the PFI should be to give the public sector more control and to put the Treasury in charge.

Ms Armstrong: Would the hon. Gentleman like to remind the House how many PFI hospital buildings were in the pipeline and how many the previous Government managed to secure? My information is that not a single hospital was agreed, and that means that no building has taken place in the national health service in the past three years.

Mr. Chope: I am not an expert on all the hospital projects, but I do know this: annexed to today's Government statement is a list of PFI projects that are under way and in process as a result of Conservative Government policies. From recollection, I think that the value of those projects extends beyond £700 million, which is a large investment and a tribute to the previous Government's work.

We know that there was a hiccup over some of the NHS projects, which was why a special Bill was drafted and brought in by the previous Government—*[Interruption.]* It was prepared by the previous Government for introduction and it has been adopted by the present Government. I have no complaint about that, but let us not rewrite history. Indeed, the list of the PFI deals signed before April 1997, which was released by the Treasury, shows that the PFI was making good progress. All that has happened in the past few weeks is that some PFI projects have been put at risk and others have been put on hold.

The Minister of State implied that the problem that the Bill addresses is a lack of private sector confidence, and that she wishes to restore it. We should not allow this occasion to pass without reminding ourselves of some of the reasons why that private sector confidence was lost. It was lost because of the behaviour of councils under the control of old Labour. In the late 1980s, Hammersmith and Fulham council engaged in some £6 billion of money-market gambling, speculating with its ratepayers' cash, but that council was acting ultra vires and, as a result, it avoided having to pay back more than £100 million that it owed to banks and financial institutions, after making massive losses in interest rate swaps and option deals. Not surprisingly, having had their fingers burnt in that way, the banks and financial institutions were loth to lend to local authorities just on their say-so. There were other cases involving guarantees by local authorities, which, again, were found to have been entered into ultra vires.

Will the Minister confirm that the entry into capital market transactions on a speculative basis by local authorities remains, despite the Bill, ultra vires and that such transactions cannot be certified by the procedures as set out in the Bill? Will the Government confirm that the Bill does not alter the fact that local authorities can go bankrupt? Will the Minister confirm that central Government are not and will not be a guarantor of the debts of local authorities?

The Bill refers to a minimum length of contract to which its procedures will apply. Will there also be a maximum length of contract, because some of the deals that are being contemplated potentially involve fettering the discretion of councils over many decades?

The Bill does not vest local authorities with powers of general competence, but perhaps the Minister will tell us what the Government's plans are in that respect. Many Labour local authorities have been seeking such powers for a long time, and they will obviously be disappointed that the Bill does not legislate for them.

What is the scope for local authority guarantees to financiers? On a number of occasions, local authorities have been tempted to give guarantees for the performance of partnership deals to financiers and thereby impose on their taxpayers the contingent liability in respect of those guarantees. We know that the Treasury is reluctant to give—indeed, wholly opposed to giving—such guarantees in relation to general Government expenditure unless those guarantees count against the public sector borrowing requirement, but are the Government minded to provide a relaxation of the capital expenditure rules under section 40 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 in respect of guarantees given by local authorities? At the end of the day, the issue is the extent to which taxpayers will be protected against the actions of their councils when they act ultra vires.

There are many questions for the Government to answer in this debate or perhaps in more detail in Committee. Will the Bill ensure that there is a mass of new local authority partnership schemes? Certainly,

[Mr. Chope]

we hope that that will be the case. Indeed, that is why provision was made for £50 million in the past financial year and for £200 million this year. We hope that those schemes will be brought forward.

The Bill will certainly allay the concerns of private sector financiers about local authorities acting ultra vires, but will it remove local authorities' suspicions about the need for risk takers to have a chance to make profits? One of the biggest constraints on partnership deals between local government and the private sector has been the feeling of many local councillors that they can enter into a deal, pass the risk to the private sector and expect the private sector to accept that risk without taking any profit in the event of the deal proving successful. Unless there is a change of attitude about that aspect of partnership deals, I am pessimistic about the overall outcome.

We support the Bill, however, and wish it a fair wind. We are as keen as the Minister to ensure that it reaches the statute book. We hope that in Committee we shall receive the answers to a few more questions.

4.7 pm

Mr. Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): I welcome the Bill. Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) drifted substantially from the subject matter, and I am afraid that some of his points were tendentious to say the least. It is a technical Bill, but it has very important practical implications. Perhaps I could sketch some of the commercial background.

There is always a difficulty in commercial transactions when a party deals with an entity. It may be a problem of the authority of those purporting to contract on behalf of the counter-party, but there is also a question of capacity. That problem arises with companies, trusts and co-operative bodies. I hope that the House will at some point revisit the problem that arises when bodies contract with trusts. Trusts are big business, and have an important role in the financial world.

A number of years ago, the problem with company contracts was dealt with: statute abrogated the ultra vires rule, and the doctrine of constructive notice was modified in relation to corporate contracts. All this was to be welcomed, but, unfortunately, there was and is a problem with the local authorities, and the problem is that of ultra vires.

My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned several high-profile cases that have occurred since 1991, as did the hon. Member for Christchurch. Those cases concerned transactions involving derivatives and guarantees. The decisions led to a reluctance on the part of financial institutions to deal with local authorities.

The leading case was that involving Hammersmith and Fulham council. Many were critical of that decision of the House of Lords, sitting in its judicial capacity, believing that it was commercially unrealistic and that the Court of Appeal had adopted a more commercially realistic approach, distinguishing between debt management and speculative transactions.

The decision had a chilling effect on the transactions entered into by local authorities and the extent to which financial institutions dealt with them. Unfortunately, it led to a fall in the reputation of the City of London. Many European banks became disinclined to deal with local authorities. They could not understand why English law, which is generally conducive to commercial transactions, was unfavourable in this case. It was no consolation when, as a result of a series of cases following that decision, the courts decided that money paid over was recoverable on restitutionary principles, and when local authorities gave guarantees to banks.

The effects of the decision had to be dealt with. Fortunately, that led to the establishment of the Financial Law Panel. I commend the work of that body, established and supported by major financial institutions in the City of London and by major law firms. I have had a small association with its activities. It has done sterling work on clarifying English law to give greater certainty to commercial transactions, thereby enhancing the reputation of the City of London.

The Financial Law Panel prepared a short report on the problem, as a result of which the Bill emerged. I shall not go through the details of the Bill. As my hon. Friend the Minister explained, it creates a safe harbour, and there is a self-certification process. The Bill does not exclude the possibility of judicial review, permitting the courts to review contracts that have gone through the self-certification procedure.

It is generally accepted that the Bill will be conducive to financial transactions. The consequences of the swaps decision of 1991, which deterred foreign banks from dealing with local authorities, will be reversed. The idea behind the Bill is good, and has been welcomed by the markets. The Bill will work, and when it is explained to financial institutions, it will provide a boost to their willingness to participate in private finance initiatives and other transactions. I support the Bill.

4.13 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): It is pleasant to find you still in the Chair, Madam Speaker, and for once to address you and not one of your Deputies.

At the start of the debate, mention was made of resurrection. It is fair to say that, in a sense, the Bill attempts to give the kiss of life to the private finance initiative. As the Minister said, under the Conservative Government, the PFI had become more than a little moribund. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House welcome an opportunity to ensure that there is still life in the PFI, so that it can continue properly to be of use to local authorities and other government bodies.

In principle, local authorities should be given the opportunity to use the PFI or to contract out services. Where possible, they should be given the option to go their own way in providing the services their electors require. However, for one particular reason, the PFI is likely to prove rather expensive.

Inevitably, when risks are moved from the public sector to the private sector, higher borrowing costs are likely to be involved. Therefore, it would not be sensible for any public body to finance its operations privately or through a contractor unless other efficiencies were involved. In some cases, other efficiencies may be involved in contracting out to the private sector.

In local government terms, however, there is another problem which has been mentioned in the debate, and which is the very cause of the Bill: an extra risk is

involved because of various ultra vires rulings that have been made in respect of local authorities. That increases the risk, and can serve only to increase the cost of involving the private sector, and in some cases to make it impossible.

As the Bill attempts to overcome those difficulties, we join the Conservatives in not opposing it. However, perhaps unlike the Conservatives, had they remained in government, we would not have introduced such a Bill had we been the governing party on 1 May, as we believe that an alternative way of overcoming the problems would have been preferable. We support the introduction into local government of a power of general competence, which has already been mentioned by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope). Such a power would probably make the Bill unnecessary.

Before the election, the Labour party apparently spoke in favour of a power of general competence for local government. Therefore, it was disappointing that there was no mention of such a power in the Labour manifesto. However, it is contained in the European charter of local self-government. Of all the moves that the Government have made since 1 May, I would commend above all the signing of that charter.

Article 4.2 states:

"Local authorities shall, within the limits of the law, have full discretion to exercise their initiative with regard to any matter which is not excluded from their competence nor assigned to any other authority."

If the Government fulfil their apparent wishes in signing the charter, and introduce a power of general competence for local government in the United Kingdom, the Bill may be short-lived. Were a power of general competence to be introduced, the Bill would rapidly become unnecessary.

I was delighted, therefore, that the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said in another place that the Government intend to introduce a power of general competence in Northern Ireland. That is good news. He was quoted to that effect in the *Municipal Journal* this week.

I hope that that legislation will be introduced and will be rapidly followed by similar legislation for this country. A general power of competence would be a much better way to overcome the problems of the PFI, and it would also be beneficial for local government in many other ways. All three parties in local government have pressed for such a power, including the Labour party through the Local Government Association. I hope that the Minister will accept that point, and ensure that the Bill, welcome though it is in the short term, becomes unnecessary in a few months.

4.19 pm

Mr. Fabian Hamilton (Leeds, North–East): I ask for the indulgence of the House, as this is the first time that I have had the honour of speaking in the Chamber. As the Member for Leeds, North-East, I follow the Conservative, Timothy Kirkhope, who rose to the rank of junior Minister at the Home Office. He worked hard for his constituents in the 10 years that he represented the constituency. His predecessor was the late Sir Keith Joseph, the distinguished parliamentarian and architect of what became known as Thatcherism. He represented the constituency for 31 years, and held many high offices of state.

I wish to quote another predecessor this afternoon. The last Labour Member to represent Leeds, North-East was the great Alice Bacon. In the conclusion of her maiden speech on what became the National Insurance (Industrial Injuries) Act 1946, she said:

"We must remember that this Bill is to deal with the ill, the crippled, and, probably, the depressed, and that, for these people, an ounce of warm humanity is worth a ton of cold legality."—[*Official Report*, 10 October 1945; Vol. 414, c. 296.]

I hope that that sentiment will guide this Parliament.

I have the great privilege of representing a constituency of diverse places and communities. It stretches from inner-city Chapeltown to the stately home of Harewood house. It encompasses the largest Afro-Caribbean community in West Yorkshire, a large Sikh and Muslim population, the largest Jewish community in Yorkshire, which has been well established since the early 19th century, and representatives of the growing Vietnamese, Chinese, Greek, Polish, Latvian, Gujerati Indian, Iranian and African communities that make up the most ethnically rich of Leeds constituencies.

I am also fortunate to have in my constituency the magnificent Roundhay park, one of the finest and largest parks in any European city, with its splendid tropical house and butterfly garden. It is a tribute to the work of Leeds city council over many decades, and the largest tourist attraction in England after Hampton court.

Leeds has one of the fastest growing economies of any city in Great Britain, with more jobs being created than in any other city. One reason for that is the partnership between the Labour-controlled local authority and the business community, which has brought investment by many new firms, many from the financial sector, to the city. I pay tribute to three leaders of Leeds city council, two of whom are now Members of Parliament, for the part they have played in the city's economic regeneration.

Economic good fortune and prosperity do not necessarily bring investment in public housing or schools. The Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill that we discussed on Tuesday will have important consequences for the city of Leeds, especially Leeds, North-East. Social housing is more than just the local authority provision of low-cost rented property. There is a whole host of different providers in the many small independent housing associations.

In Leeds, we have Leeds Partnership Homes, which is a collaboration between the local authority and the housing associations. It has worked for the benefit of those citizens who seek quality housing for a reasonable rent. Organisations such as Unity Housing in Chapeltown have provided good quality low-cost homes for the Afro-Caribbean community, and Leeds Jewish Housing Association, with its 1,000 tenants and 415 properties—many of which are sheltered and specialist homes—has served the Jewish community of Moortown very well.

Leeds has more than £70.4 million in the bank from council house capital receipts, with an estimated £10 million coming in from new sales each year. The release of this sum on a phased basis will do a great deal to refurbish and regenerate old stock, which, according to the housing department of Leeds city council, will need £485 million in the next few years just to bring all properties up to modern standards.

[Mr. Fabian Hamilton]

The previous Government's borrowing approval for capital spending was £9.6 million in 1997–98 for the whole of the city of Leeds. In my constituency, there are more than 6,000 council homes, for which identified necessary improvements will cost about £37.8 million. The extra investment that the Bill will generate will be invaluable to the tenants I represent.

In addition to the much-needed improvement of the housing stock in my constituency, the spending of capital receipts will inevitably generate much-needed employment. In Chapeltown especially, the level of male unemployment is one of the highest in Yorkshire. I am confident that the many job opportunities that will result directly from the enactment of this short Bill will benefit my constituents.

In common with those of most local education authorities, Leeds LEA's schools are in great need of building improvements. Leeds is the second largest LEA in England, and has devolved almost 93 per cent. of its budget to schools in the city. That may well be the reason why there are only two grant-maintained schools in Leeds, out of more than 300 schools in total.

As well as the local management of school budgets, the LEA has devolved some capital spending, a policy which has been very popular among schools and their governing bodies. But even this is not enough to counter the huge backlog in spending on school buildings, many of which are in a poor state of repair. The Bill will enable many more private finance initiative schemes to go ahead in areas where they are much needed.

Leeds city council has established a policy of working closely with the private sector over a number of years, especially through organisations such as the Leeds Initiative and various sector initiatives. The PFI, if properly carried out, and with safeguards for public and private interests, will allow the rebuilding of such dilapidated school buildings as Cardinal Heenan Roman Catholic high school in my constituency. Other schemes could benefit schools such as Upper Wortley primary school and Wortley high school, which could be redeveloped using surplus land that could not be used for school playing fields, perhaps as a trade-off for part of the construction costs of the new building.

In the end, it is the welfare and the quality of education for our children which count, and I welcome anything that will improve that education. Used properly, the PFI will greatly enhance our schools and buildings, and will assist staff in concentrating on the job of educating, rather than being distracted into site management, as so many senior school staff are currently forced to do.

The combination of this Bill and the Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill will, I hope, lead to a renaissance in local government, which has been so starved of capital during the past 18 years. I commend the Bill to the House, and I hope that its swift passage will allow the rebuilding of schools in Leeds and all over the country, so that we deliver our priority election pledge, education.

4.28 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds, North–East (Mr. Hamilton) on his maiden speech. They are always extremely difficult, and making them during a quiet Bill, when antagonism is not anticipated, always helps. I also thank him for his praise for his predecessor, and for his predecessor's predecessor.

In the same vein, the Minister referred to the resurrection of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) on the Front Bench. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch in particular is experienced in local government. We have shared tables and arenas in the past, and it looks as if this is to continue.

In a funny way, this is in effect a maiden speech for me. In the last days of the previous Parliament, the boundary commission decided to reduce the number of seats in Croydon from four to three. I lost out, and went looking for another seat. I was delighted to be selected and elected for the seat of Mole Valley.

My predecessor, Kenneth Baker, is extremely well known and has had a distinguished career. He was particularly effective, well liked and popular in Mole Valley, which he had served since 1983. To us, he is one of the stars of the Thatcher Government. In the limited time available, I shall touch on two areas for which he is particularly remembered. The media remember him more as a Conservative Central Office magician, who managed to pull tremendous successes—sometimes they were displayed as greater than they were, but I must be cautious in saying that—out of a hat when everyone was anticipating defeat. The second area was as Secretary of State for Education. It is now accepted across the board, and, I believe, on both sides of the House, that he laid the foundations for modern education. He introduced the core curriculum and testing, which, in spite of the hoo-hah, nonsense, complaints, screaming and so forth by all and sundry at the time, have been accepted as the right move, and as a basis from which the previous Government and the present Government seem to have moved forward.

Interestingly, Kenneth Baker had a career in politics, in government and as an author. He also had an extremely successful career—I was going to call it valuable, but that is a difficult word—in business, but last week he was tempted back, and we now have his presence in another place. I am sure that, at least on the Conservative side of the House, his comments and contributions will be recognised and accepted.

I am delighted and proud to represent the Mole Valley people. The area is superb. It is the epitome of England's green and pleasant land—helped at the moment by the constant April showers in the wrong month. We have two delightful English country towns in Dorking and Leatherhead. Both need careful and sympathetic regeneration—that goes particularly for Leatherhead. I am afraid that one or two small voices in the area see conservation as stagnation. The area has not been assisted by the Liberal councillors, but they are slowly being moved off the scene and replaced with Conservatives.

One of the key aspects of Mole Valley is that it is green belt, and that is extremely precious to the people there. In spite of that, the area is highly residential. I have mentioned the two main towns, but there are dozens of villages, all of which are exquisite, and some well known. They range in size from Bookham and Ripley to some picturesque small villages—Abinger Hammer is a famous one.

All the villages have their post office and general store—or almost all—and they will benefit from the previous Government's move on the business rate and rural areas and villages. Like any good English village, they all have at least one pub—probably more. I can recommend just about every single pub in the area to those of us who are prepared to stagger down there when the House releases us and we have a summer recess.

A large percentage of people in the area are commuters. We have a good rail service through to Dorking, Leatherhead and Effingham Junction, which is showing the benefits of privatisation in spite of a few union difficulties at the moment—I am sure that those will be resolved. In addition, we have a good network of main roads, A roads and motorways, which are both assets and threats to the local people, and are being watched carefully—the same applies to Gatwick airport.

Due to Surrey county council's long history of Conservative control, the education standard was high. The council has now returned to Conservative control, and we will move back to a high education standard and resulting low unemployment.

Many of the major contributors to the local economy and local employment in this country are extremely hard working, and potentially quite wealthy, people in the area. There has been a tendency, especially in some newspapers, to sneer at those people, but I believe that they should be encouraged and congratulated, because they stimulate the economy and create employment. I shall wait until 2 July to see whether they will have received that encouragement.

The Bill is small and necessary, and has come clothed in flag-waving by the Labour party, which has suddenly decided that it accepts the private finance initiative. It has been extremely slow on partnership with the private sector, and had a knee-jerk reaction to competitive tendering. I suspect that, if some Labour Members realised what we were talking about, especially where Labour local authorities are concerned, they would not touch it.

That explains the difficulty that many firms have had in introducing the PFI in many local authorities. The previous Government changed the ethos and thinking, and adopted and adapted the rules. There have been complaints about the lack of local government finance, and the reality of the tight budgets for local authorities has forced many difficult left-wing authorities and councillors suddenly to realise the benefits of PFI. Without it, many of them would have continued with the same old procedures, thinking that they knew best and not accepting that, quite apart from the financial benefits of PFI and competitive tendering, the innovation of the private sector was a gem.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch spoke of some of the successes. Considerable benefits have come against the background of suspicion and difficulty and of a change to a new system that even the private sector was cautious about. We have new prisons, trains and roads, and about £7 billion-worth of PFI schemes in the offing, including hospitals, one of which I understand has already been started.

The private sector was particularly cautious about local government. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch touched on a few flag-wavings—instances in which local authorities had frightened off the private sector. If I were in local government now, considering the private sector, of if I were in the private sector considering local government and PFI schemes, I would be extremely cautious about schemes with many of the Labour local authorities, as their attitude often belies the face that the Minister put on it in her opening speech.

Fortunately, the Local Government Association has a dedicated unit. That at least shows that some councillors are accepting the PFI, and moving in the right direction. The Minister was right to say that one case hit confidence extremely hard, and the Bill must be seen in that light.

I have one or two points of caution, if not of concern, about the Bill, and I hope that Ministers will introduce changes or regulations in Committee. I am concerned about some of the regulations being under negative resolution, and I hope that the Minister will review that. The area of concern is the certificated contract provisions. As the Bill stands, those provisions could be abused.

Any change in legislation that restricts the power of the courts or the district auditor needs considerable safeguards. Those safeguards are not apparent at this stage, and I seek assurances that they will be put in place and made effective, either in the Bill or in regulations, preferably requiring affirmative resolution.

As many hon. Members know, and many people outside realise to their discontent, the twisting and turning of some local authorities is legendary, and the Bill as it stands could provide enormous opportunities for that. The district auditor must be able to act prior to the council certifying any contract. That means that the auditor must have a fully disclosed copy of the contract well in advance of the council's decision. I recognise that one could go to the court afterwards, but it would be more appropriate to take the action beforehand and allow the district auditor to react to it.

It would be a further safeguard if the monitoring officer or the local authority's director of finance were required to confirm the probity of the contract. Furthermore, I assume that certification will apply only to long-term contracts, where the value of the contracts and that of the assets are above a certain considerable minimum. Finally, although this may seem ultra suspicious, experience of the ways of some councils is such that I hope that the Bill will restrict the assets to be provided to those that are reasonably necessary for the service concerned with the contract being considered.

Such matters will be discussed in Committee, and, in general, I accept the need for the Bill, in spite of the flag-waving that went with it. There must be an opportunity for public services to be provided by the private sector, which has the necessary expertise and lateral thinking. We should recognise the points that have been made and carried through successfully by many Conservative councils, which regard themselves as enablers rather than necessarily as providers. I suspect

[Sir Paul Beresford]

that, under this Government, the tendency will be to roll in the opposite direction until such time as councils progressively return to Conservative control.

4.40 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): On the face of it, the Bill is a technical measure that dots some i's and crosses some t's on contract law and regulations, but I believe that it is more important than that. The Government's approach in some ways bodes ill. It gives us a glimpse of a centralising tendency that I thought had gone when the Conservatives went into opposition on 1 May. Some aspects of the Bill show that centralisation is still alive and kicking in the Government.

I have several fundamental and practical concerns. No additional powers are granted to local authorities. As I understand it, it takes away the rights of council tax payers in the event of a council acting outside its powers.

Two weeks ago, the UK ambassador to the Council of Europe signed the declaration of local self-government. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) in welcoming that important step by the Government to acknowledge the essential role of local government in Britain. However, more than words are necessary. We need action to turn those important statements into something practical on the ground.

As a local authority member for the past 11 years, I have seen at first hand how the previous Government lost their local government base and then sought to replace local democracy with ministerial regulation, direction and ever-tighter financial controls. The new Government must sound a new note for local government. While some recent ministerial speeches suggest that they desire to create a new relationship between central and local government, we remain to be convinced that that is what will come about. Even in the darkest days of the last Government, local government was innovative, inclusive and able to respond to the needs and aspiration of local communities. Local government does not need more duties imposed on it. The news that Ministers propose to consult their colleagues in local government about the scope of a new duty to promote economic, social and environmental well-being misses the point entirely. Local government needs a power of general competence. Such a power would make the Bill unnecessary. It would help us to rejuvenate local government and give substance to the Government's rhetoric about community leadership, and to the Liberal Democrats' commitment to the idea of local government's role as the leader in the local community.

Before the general election, a Select Committee in the other place investigated the relationship between central and local government and produced a powerful and persuasive report entitled "Rebuilding Trust". The report must not be allowed to gather dust and its recommendations should form the basis of legislation. It recommended

> "a new statutory power of local competence, enabling an authority to act in the interests of the local community within the limits of financial prudence but without a need to be certain that no other powers are available".

That seems to me to be the way forward, and it is a shame that the Bill contains no such proposals.

The Bill targets private finance initiative contracts; it tries to make a bad idea work. If the Government think that the PFI is the answer to all their—and local government's—financial difficulties, they must have been asking a strange question. Throughout the 1980s, creative finance in local government—lease-back and deferred purchase arrangements—was pilloried by the Conservative Government. Their reason for such attacks—that they put costs on to future generations for providing today's services—seems odd when we consider what the PFI does. By simply changing the words, it gives credibility to something that was attacked when local government did it in the past.

The PFI is a way of circumventing strict Treasury rules. The problem is not the Treasury rules but the mindset that regards them as God-given and unchangeable. I hope that something can be done about that. I welcome the Minister's statement about the creation of a task force to examine the PFI. I hope that it will question the basis of the Treasury rules, how they treat capital expenditure and the way in which they confine and restrict unnecessarily.

I have several practical concerns. My research suggests that there are still anxieties in the City about how the Bill will assist PFI contracts coming into being. It may cover situations such as that faced by my local authority a year or so ago with Morgan Grenfell and the Wellesley housing association, but it does not cover contracts such as those that involve the transfer of residential homes, where the contract provides only services, not assets.

There is also the problem of length of time and the lack of a financial cut-off. I hope that the Minister will respond to this. For example, a large contract that lasted for less than five years could have substantial financial implications, but a contract that runs for a long time, such as social services spot purchase contracts, could have only a small financial implication. As I understand the measure, and I look forward to being corrected if I am wrong, the compulsion to certify such contracts would increase the local authority bureaucracy involved in dealing with the documentation and in the democratic process. Perhaps in Committee we will be further enlightened about that.

Despite its accompanying explanatory notes, the Bill has practical implications for local authority officers who certify such contracts that need to be clarified. The Minister mentioned the Waltham Forest case, in which individual officers were, I believe, found liable. The officers who may become responsible for certifying contracts are worried about whether they will be caught by the Bill. A monitoring officer expressed concern to me about the increased cost of having constantly to go to counsel for advice on signing such certificates.

Finally, what checks and balances will apply to the compensation arrangements negotiated between local authorities and businesses set out in clauses 2 and 3? Will the Minister spell out what rights of challenge will be available to enable the reasonableness of arrangements to be tested? If he will not, there will be serious concern that private interests will be protected by the Bill at the expense of public interests. Clause 7, as I understand the explanation of it, means that the taxpayer would always lose out, and that cannot be right.

I believe that the House should be debating legislation to give local government the power of general competence. Measured against that radical proposal, I have to say that the Bill is a timid mouse of a measure.

4.49 pm

Mr. Chope: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): It is most unusual for any hon. Member to speak twice on Second Reading, but, with the leave of the House, I call Mr. Chope.

Ms Armstrong: They are unusual circumstances.

Mr. Chope: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As the hon. Lady says, there are unusual circumstances today. I am grateful for the indulgence of the House.

I do not intend to comment on what hon. Members have said in the debate other than to congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds, North-East (Mr. Hamilton) on his excellent exemplary maiden speech. On such occasions it is always a good idea to try to find some common ground, and both he and I have the privilege of having a parent who was a circuit judge. I do not know whether his mother was as horrified as my father was when I chose politics as a career; perhaps we will find out in due course.

The hon. Gentleman paid a fitting tribute to his predecessor, Timothy Kirkhope, whom we miss very much on the Conservative Benches. I had hoped that when I came back to the House he would be among my colleagues. The hon. Gentleman also paid tribute to the great and late Lord Joseph—a tribute which was complemented by that made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford). Indeed, it seems that the hon. Gentleman is following a fine tradition of Members for Leeds, North-East. He obviously conducted his research to the full, because he was able to discover that, many, many years ago, there was someone who had represented the Labour party in that constituency just after the war.

As Parliament progresses, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not be too disappointed that the expectations that he raised in his maiden speech have not been realised. I was horrified to hear of the extent of housing dereliction that seems to have arisen in Leeds as a result of the many years during which the city council has been controlled by the Labour party. If the hon. Gentleman wants a good example of partnership schemes that work, he should consider the wholesale voluntary transfer of housing stock to bring in and leverage the support of the building societies and the housing associations. Such schemes have worked extremely effectively. It is a pity that the people who have run Leeds over the years have not had the imagination to pursue that type of scheme.

If the figures that the hon. Gentleman gave are anywhere near accurate they bear out the impossibility of squaring that amount of dereliction and need for refurbishment with the commitments so far made by the Government to invest in housing and undertake such refurbishment. The hon. Gentleman's interesting speech brought back to me the times when I visited Leeds as a housing Minister a few years ago.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley was extremely kind in his comments about me. My greatest responsibility when I ceased to be the leader of Wandsworth council was to ensure that I had an able successor. He excelled in that position beyond the wildest expectations of anyone, and he performed distinguished services as a Minister. Now the people of Mole Valley are the beneficiaries of his custodianship. He is a diligent Member of Parliament. He described the problems of Leatherhead and Dorking, and the fine achievements of his predecessor, and we look forward to his further articulate contributions on behalf of the people of Mole Valley. They are lucky to have him as their new Member of Parliament.

I was interested to note that my little tease of the Minister about what had happened to the power of general competence was taken up with a vengeance by the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel). I hope that when the Under-Secretary replies he will make some reference to what has happened about that, because hon. Members will be awaiting with bated breath the outcome of the relevant deliberations.

As has been said, the Bill is short and reasonably straightforward. I hope that the Under-Secretary will answer the questions that have been raised in the time that is remaining. I estimate that to be just short of five hours, so that should give him plenty of time to respond.

4.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): At one stage, I anticipated a potentially extremely long response to the debate, but, given the Opposition's decision not to divide the House, I am delighted that we have had a reasonably brief and focused debate on this excellent measure. I am therefore delighted that we will be able to bring our proceedings to an end rather sooner than many had anticipated.

I listened to the debate with great interest and I welcome the opportunity to respond to the various points that have been raised.

My hon. Friend the Minister opened the debate by explaining why we had introduced the Bill. I make no apology for briefly returning to those reasons. It is the Government's policy that local authorities should explore the scope for partnership with the private sector to achieve the best value for money in delivering services to the community. Following various high-profile court cases, doubts have arisen in the private sector about the powers of local authorities to enter into contracts for the provision of assets and services. Investors are concerned that they could suffer financially if local authorities are found to have acted ultra vires. The Government seek to end all doubts by clarifying local authorities' powers to enter into partnership contracts and by providing a means of reassurance for contractors through a simple and transparent certification procedure.

The Bill provides the framework in which authorities and the private sector can work together in confidence. It in no way undermines the rights of local taxpayers and auditors to challenge authorities where they have acted unlawfully.

The Bill should be seen in the context of the Government's policy to improve and streamline the private finance initiative and public-private partnerships. The Paymaster General, whom we are delighted to see on the Front Bench, has published today a summary and the conclusions of the review of the PFI conducted by Malcolm Bates. It sets out a clear agenda of action across the public sector to get deals delivered.

[Mr. Nick Raynsford]

I welcome the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) back to the Chamber after a period of absence which is one of those accidents of political life that some of us have experienced. I also welcome him to his Front-Bench position and look forward to debating with him on future occasions. He paid generous tribute to his predecessor, Diana Maddock. Those of us who were involved in housing matters in the previous Parliament found her to be an extremely assiduous and positive contributor to debates. She also displayed such characteristics in her work in her constituency, which the hon. Gentleman acknowledged.

The hon. Gentleman offered his support for the generality of the Bill, but he slightly spoilt that good effect by claiming, with no justification, that the Government are not whole-heartedly committed to public-private partnerships. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister advocated such partnerships years before the previous Government introduced the PFI model. I, too, argued strongly for new models for local housing companies to achieve private investment in co-operation with local authorities, again long before the previous Government advocated the PFI. I must therefore tell the hon. Gentleman that the Government will take no lessons from the Opposition either about the parentage of the public-private partnership model or about our commitment to achieving such partnerships.

The difference between the Opposition and the Government is that we are creating that model. I must tell the hon. Gentleman that the record of the previous Government was lamentable. Year after year, we heard forecasts of the new deals that would be achieved. We were told again and again that hospital contracts were about to be signed, but, at the end of the day, despite all their pledges and promises, that Government went out of office on 1 May without having signed a single hospital contract. That represented an abject failure to deliver on a policy that had bipartisan support—there was no political obstacle to it. That lack of progress was simply the result of the previous Government's failure and incompetence to drive through a policy which they said that they technically believed in.

Against that background, I find it hard to take seriously the hon. Gentleman's allegation that the new Government are not moving quickly enough. My hon. Friend the Paymaster General has moved with exemplary speed. His review of the private finance initiative was commissioned within a week of the new Government taking office. The report on it has already been received and has been published, within seven weeks of the new Government coming into office. That is exemplary speed, of which the private sector could justly be proud. It stands in marked contrast to the dilly-dallying and dithering of the previous Government, and their failure to deliver on the project.

The hon. Gentleman claimed that we had been delaying the appointment of a chief executive. The Government had no intention of anticipating Malcolm Bates's recommendations, because his was an independent review. To have acted in advance of it, in terms of the appointment of a chief executive, would have been quite improper. Now that Bates has announced his findings, which we have fully accepted and published, we are taking extensive soundings to identify the best person for the job. Malcolm Bates himself will be involved in the selection process, with senior Treasury officials. That is an indication of the Government's commitment and our speed in responding to the need for a better organised framework for public-private partnership.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of detailed questions. He asked whether local authorities could go bankrupt. The Government do not guarantee local authorities. Authorities have substantial assets and revenue streams; therefore they are a good credit risk. That is not a matter which the Government can guarantee.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Government would make it easier for authorities to guarantee contractors' liabilities. The answer is simple. The capital finance regulations do not allow public-private partnership treatment to contracts that involve such guarantees, as that would involve no risk transfer. We see no reason to change that arrangement.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether there should be a maximum period for contracts, as well as a minimum period. In order to obtain the minimum lifetime cost of the assets delivered by the contract, it is necessary to ensure that there is an appropriate period for the contract. A period of 20 to 30 years is often needed, but it would be wrong to be too prescriptive and to insist that the maximum period should be 30 years. The matter must be examined properly and scrupulously, in consultation with private sector partners.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Cranston) on an excellent maiden speech. *[Interruption.]* I apologise—he has already given his maiden speech, but he is a new Member and spoke extremely effectively and with great knowledge of the legal issues involved in partnership deals. He welcomed the Bill as a practical way of dealing with some of the difficulties, and he referred to the Financial Law Panel. That has been much involved in the thinking behind the Bill, as have other bodies, such as the 4 Ps—the public-private partnerships programme. They view the Bill as a positive step that should be welcomed in the financial markets. We are grateful for their help. I appreciate the contribution of my hon. Friend in an admirable speech.

The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) described our Bill as breathing the kiss of life into a moribund PFI. I agree with him. We seek to bring life back to a process that has not moved as fast as it should have.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the power of general competence, which was also mentioned by other speakers. That may be the Liberal party policy, but the Government believe that there should be a different approach, with an emphasis on the power of community initiative—the power of authorities to pursue the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area. There must be limits; there is no question of local authorities having unfettered power to undertake any activity that they choose. That is not feasible in the real world. Although Liberal Members may believe that it is appropriate for local authorities to have their own defence programmes, that is fanciful. It could never be contemplated by any sensible politician.

Mr. Rendel: I am not sure whether the Minister has yet read the European charter for local self-government. Article 2 refers, in effect, to a power of general competence. Of course, powers of general competence for

local authorities are restricted by Governments in terms of those areas where there should not be competence for local government. It is clear, however, that there is a huge difference between giving local government power over any matter that is not specifically excluded by statute, and not giving local government powers until they are included by statute. That is what the power of general competence means, as the Minister ought to know.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman gives it all away when he concedes that there must be a limit on the powers of local authorities. By doing so, he undermines the point that he made in his earlier contribution—that a power of general competence would make the Bill redundant. Of course it would not, because any statutory power is liable to judicial review.

The financial markets would still look for a safe harbour to protect their investment, even if there were the power of general competence that the hon. Gentleman advocates. He is dealing in an unrealistic assumption about the appropriate framework for the future of local government and of public-private partnerships. We are living in the real world, and we have presented practical proposals to tackle the real problems and to ensure that local authorities and the private sector can work together on a sensible and practical basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-East (Mr. Hamilton) did make an excellent maiden speech, in which he revealed his detailed understanding of the needs of his community and a genuine commitment to his city. He rightly emphasised the importance of partnership as a vital ingredient in future for local authorities working with the private sector in tackling many problems, not least the one that he highlighted—investment in crumbling schools. He identified Cardinal Heenan school in his constituency, which will benefit as one of the pathfinder projects currently under way.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) on his successful change of constituency. He made the move just in time, because the Labour party now holds Croydon, Central, the seat that broadly approximates to the one that he held in the previous Parliament. His move to a safer place may help to ensure that he continues to make a contribution in the House in the years ahead.

The hon. Gentleman supported the Bill, but raised specific questions. He asked why so many of the regulations were negative resolutions. The answer is that the regulations amending forms of contract that can be certified are affirmative, because they change specific provisions. For others, a negative resolution is appropriate—for example, for the capital finance regulations.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the role of the auditor and questioned whether the auditor should have an opportunity to get involved before certification. We do not accept that that would be a sensible way forward, as it would fetter the auditor's discretion to take action if there were questions about the validity of the contract. We understand that if the hon. Gentleman serves on the Standing Committee that will consider the Bill, he will raise other detailed questions, to which we will respond appropriately in Committee. We welcome the fact that he broadly supports the principles behind the Bill.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) made various criticisms of the Bill. He complained that it did not give new powers for local authorities. However, he misunderstands the purpose of the Bill. It is not intended to give new powers to local authorities. It is designed to overcome obstacles to successful public-private partnerships. If it sought to do what the hon. Gentleman wants, that would be way beyond its appropriate remit. We may return to the matter in Committee.

The hon. Gentleman implied that the Bill might take away the powers of individuals to challenge local authorities. As I have made clear, it does not do so. There will be an open power for individuals and the auditor to challenge a local authority where it appears that the local authority has acted improperly or ultra vires.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam assumed that the Government view the public-private partnership route as the solution to all local government financing requirements. We do not, but it is a useful additional tool for creating opportunities to tackle problems effectively through partnership and to foster the spirit of partnership that is crucial not just to good relations between local authorities and the private sector, but to the regeneration of so many areas of our country that need a partnership approach as well as investment.

Mr. Burstow: Will the Minister clarify the way in which clause 7 will work in respect of the compensation arrangements in certified contracts? In cases where the courts make an ultra vires ruling, will the public be able to challenge the reasonableness of clauses in such contracts? If they cannot, taxpayers will continue to lose money as local authorities will be obliged to pay under the compensation clauses.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman is getting slightly carried away by the technicalities of the subject. The legislation is designed to ensure that local communities do not have to meet additional costs. It establishes a sensible certification framework that will make sure that proper questions are asked before contracts are entered into. Our objective is to ensure that proper safeguards exist.

The private sector would not enter into contracts if it did not believe that it could recover the contribution that it expected to receive through the compensation route should a contract be ruled ultra vires. We have achieved the proper balance. We are ensuring that local authorities have the power to enter into contracts and we are establishing a more prudent framework for making contracts in order to safeguard public interest, while providing the equivalent of a safe harbour for the private sector so that it may invest confidently without fearing that it may be left with no way of recovering its investment. That is a sensible and practical way of addressing real, existing problems.

The hon. Gentleman also questioned the certification process, which he described as bureaucratic. It is not: it is a sensible provision that any sensible local authority will welcome. It will help to concentrate the mind on the process of reaching agreement on the contract. It will also ensure that the proper steps are taken to assess the probity and appropriateness of a contract so that the local authority may enter into it with confidence. That is the correct way to deal with partnership arrangements.

The Government believe that partnerships between the public and private sectors are the best way of raising the quality of services delivered to the community. On 8 May,

[Mr. Raynsford]

my hon. Friend the Paymaster General announced an end to universal testing: the rule that all projects had to be tested for private finance potential. On the same day, Malcolm Bates was asked to launch a rapid review of the workings of the private finance initiative. As I have said, that review has been completed and accepted by the Government. The summary and conclusions of Malcolm Bates's review were published this morning, and we have lost no time in ensuring that speedy action is taken to reinvigorate the private finance initiative and establish a framework for successful public-private partnerships.

The main conclusion of the Bates review was that public sector structures must be simplified and responsibilities made clear. A new Treasury task force will be set up, covering both policy and central input on projects. That will end the confusion over who is responsible for what at the centre, while making the best use of available resources and expertise. There are clear recommendations for removing the barriers that have hindered the progress of many projects to date, including measures to keep down the costs of tendering for projects.

The Government will consider carefully with the task force and PPPP the implications of developing public-private partnerships in local government and how such projects should be encouraged. The Bill is an essential part of the framework for ensuring that projects can be taken forward successfully under the partnership approach. We do not want uncertainties about local authority powers to curtail an approach that can deliver innovative schemes at best value to local communities. I am pleased to commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND

That the draft International Monetary Fund (Limit on Lending) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 28th February, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*[Mr. Graham Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

DEFENCE

That the draft Army, Air Force and Naval Discipline Acts (Continuation) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 21st May, be approved.—*[Mr. Graham Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

Building Societies

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Graham Allen.]*

5.14 pm

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I am pleased to make my maiden speech on the Adjournment concerning an issue that touches closely the lives of many people not just in my constituency but across the country. The future of building societies affects some of the most important aspects of people's lives: their homes and their family finances.

However, I shall begin by paying the traditional tributes to my predecessors. Many new women Members of Parliament have said with pride that they are the first women to represent their constituencies in Parliament. I take even greater pride in saying that I am not the first woman Member of Parliament to represent my constituency: the first Member for Northampton, North was Maureen Colquhoun in 1974. Before her, there was only one Northampton seat, which was represented for some years by Margaret Bondfield—a Labour Member of Parliament and the first woman from any political party to achieve Cabinet rank. There may be many women in Parliament now, but we have not been here for very long. Margaret Bondfield was one of the first female Members of Parliament and, during the election campaign, I met a very elderly man who remembered canvassing for her in the early 1920s.

My immediate predecessor was Tony Marlow. He is a man of very strong views—most of which I disagree with—but I pay tribute to him for two achievements. First, he commanded the loyalty of the people of Northampton, North who returned him faithfully to Parliament for 18 years—an achievement which I would do well to emulate—and, secondly, he gave more grief to his own party than he ever did to mine. If, during my parliamentary career, I can manage to cause as much trouble for the Conservatives as he did, I shall be well pleased. I wish him an enjoyable retirement.

Northampton, North is an entirely urban constituency, comprising residential suburbs overwhelmingly populated by home owners and people in work who want to get on and who expect to pass on a better life to their children. I am very proud to represent them in this place. However, home ownership is not lightly won in my area. Northampton is a town of quite low wages, and the fragility of family finances was a deciding factor in the general election.

A large chunk of my constituency lies in the new town development of Northampton. Many of the people in this eastern part of the town came originally from the council estates of the inner cities in search of jobs and a better life. One of the first people I met in Northampton, North was a man who had moved there from London. He had found a job and bought his new town home. He described graphically what it was like moving from a cramped Lambeth council flat to a brand new three-bedroom house situated in the middle of green fields. However, when bad health and a spell out of work put him behind with his mortgage repayments, he lost his home. Like many others, he said that he had voted Tory since 1979. Like them, he bought the Thatcher dream, and its betrayal was a potent factor in the general election result.

As with home ownership, the quality of life enjoyed by many in Northampton, North is hard won. A bank in one part of my constituency reported that it had turned down a third of all applications for bank accounts because people's incomes were too low. Some people find a solution in self-help, and the Weston Favell credit union in my constituency is one of the oldest in the country.

Northampton has had to adjust to changing circumstances in the course of its long history. It was once the seat of a roving Parliament—until it passed a poll tax. It was briefly a university town until the students there behaved so badly that King Henry III ordered that Northampton should never again have a university. However, Nene college in my constituency hopes to change all that, and I support strongly its efforts to achieve university status. Northampton became the famous centre of Britain's boot and shoe industry and, since that industry's decline, it has become a major distribution centre and something of a centre for financial services. Quite a few of my constituents work for Barclaycard, which has a new headquarters just outside my constituency. Inside its boundaries lies part of the headquarters of the Nationwide building society, whose links with the town go back to 1848.

That long history is now in jeopardy, and with it the future of the building society movement. Nationwide is the last of the major national mutual building societies. Five independent and, some would say, maverick candidates are standing for the Nationwide board in this month's elections on a manifesto pledge to get the society to abandon its mutual status, giving a windfall bonus of shares valued at £1,000 to each Nationwide member.

The Building Societies Association has predicted that, if the five succeed in the Nationwide elections, the remaining 70 mutual building societies—many of them are small, locally based organisations—would probably take steps to turn themselves into plcs rather than be precipitated into the chaos of an unplanned conversion, which would be simply a dash for cash.

Nationwide branches throughout the country saw 25,000 people a day apply for new accounts until the society pulled down the shutters last week. The Coventry building society—another mutual organisation—has seen four times the normal level of new accounts, with most investors depositing the minimum sum possible. The pressure finally became so intense that, last week, the society increased its minimum deposit. That did nothing to dampen enthusiasm, so today it increased the sum again.

During this weekend, the chaos of the Nationwide board elections descended into farce when the leader of the five mavericks said that he still wanted to see Nationwide members get their windfall, but as a reward for keeping the society's mutual status. That a large, major financial institution, which holds mortgages on 1 million homes, should have its future decided on such whimsy is appalling.

It is easy, of course, to criticise people for opting for the quick buck, and it is also wrong. The attraction of receiving a lump sum is very real, especially when in some instances it is the first time that such a payment has been received by an individual. The long-term cost of those windfall payments, however, will be substantial.

First, there is the loss of the cheaper mortgages that building societies have provided. Secondly, there is a loss of access to home ownership for people on lower incomes who buy smaller houses than others. Building societies were created to help such people, and traditionally they have catered for them. Even now, building societies provide almost twice as many mortgages as do banks for people in the lowest income groups. Less tangibly, there is the loss of a savings culture, and in its place the encouragement of a credit culture, which has already seen people get themselves into unmanageable levels of debt.

The arguments about long-term benefits over short-term profits are difficult ones to advance in the immediate post-Tory era. The arguments in favour of the mutual building societies are rational but not immediately as attractive as £1,000 cash in hand.

Some people have raised the possibility of introducing further legislation to deal with the problems to which I have referred. The sad fact, however, is that the largest of the mutual building societies have already converted, and the fate of the others could be decided within a month. We need to ensure that, if the door is to close on an era of mutual building societies, people will still have real choice in financial services and that those on lower incomes can still have the benefits of services that are provided in the interest of the customer—of the borrower and saver—and not merely those of the shareholder.

The Government are committed to long-term planning and we are pledged to enable individuals to have their own savings accounts. I ask my hon. Friend the Paymaster General to do three things. The first is to set out Government policy towards the mutual building society and, in particular, Government attitudes towards the long-term benefits that they offer. Strong support and encouragement should be given for those who believe in the benefits of mutual building societies.

Secondly, I ask that the Government look in the longer term at the effects that conversion has had on the customer—on home ownership and savings, especially for people in lower income groups. Thirdly, I ask my hon. Friend the Paymaster General to say whether the Government, in carrying out their pledges on individual savings accounts, will consider ways of encouraging schemes that embody the mutual principles.

Financial services should be run in the interests of borrowers and savers and not for shareholders. Services should be accessible to those with low incomes, with saving schemes that demand only small initial deposits and provide checking facilities that enable people to manage their money more effectively. There should be real choice and diversity, with different types of services with different interest rates and benefits. I am not talking merely of bank accounts provided in different places.

It took 200 years for building societies to build up £290 billion of assets, assets which are held by millions of building society members. It could take only another year to fritter away that legacy.

Shortly before the general election, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), who is now the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, came to Northampton, North to examine the problem of repossessed homes. He saw rows of homes that had been boarded up and were for sale because people had run into financial problems. Behind each boarded-up front door was a tale of real hardship—broken families and disappointed hopes and dreams.

[Ms Sally Keeble]

People who have survived the 18 years of Tory boom and bust are looking to the Government for a more certain and stable future that will enable them to plan their finances and to feel that their homes really are as safe as houses. The Government would do the people of my constituency and others beyond a great service by ensuring that the benefits provided by our mutual building societies remain for future generations.

5.26 pm

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) on an excellent maiden speech and on raising an important issue which will have an effect on millions of people in future. I thank her for allowing me to take part in the debate.

The main part of the headquarters of the Nationwide building society is in my constituency. The society employs more than 2,000 people in Swindon. I speak for those and for home owners and savers who rely on the Nationwide and other building societies. Those people will be affected if the mutual status of building societies is threatened.

There is little doubt that the future of building societies has reached an important crossroads. My hon. Friend has referred to the campaign to try to convert the Nationwide building society into a bank. The pressure for short-term results from short-term thinkers who hope to cash in on windfall handouts has thrown the spotlight on building societies and raises serious questions for their future. As the last building society with a strong national presence—it is the fourth largest mortgage lender—the future of building societies is linked very much to the future of Nationwide.

I support my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North in urging my hon. Friend the Paymaster General to give a lead to the many members of building societies, so that they might value what they have in mutual building societies and hope to retain them. That links in very much with Labour's plans. Labour was elected because it gave a strong message that a Labour Government would look after the country's interests in the long term, for long-term stability and prosperity. The basis for that lies with sensible competition in the marketplace, not with people running round for short-term fast bucks.

The threat to building societies is a significant one. In 1995, it was estimated that two thirds of mortgages and over one half of savings were with building societies. It is estimated that, by the end of 1997, if no action is taken to remove the pressure on building societies to convert, those figures will have fallen to one quarter and one fifth respectively. That is likely to lead to poorer value for both savers and borrowers.

Unlike banks, which need to maximise profits to pay dividends to shareholders, building societies can keep the interest margin between savings and lending relatively narrow, to the benefit of their customers. Any profit that is made can be repaid to their customers, and in that way they provide home owners and savers with long-term benefits. The interest rate margin—the difference between the cost at which an institution borrows and lends money—gives an idea of the profits that it makes. Nationwide's margin is currently 1.8 per cent., and that of the building societies that have already converted to banks is 2.1 per cent. to 2.8 per cent. That shows the value of supporting building societies to ensure diversity and strong competition in the marketplace.

Even the threat of conversion has a detrimental effect on the genuine small saver. It creates a huge increase in activity: thousands of people open speculative accounts with as little as £100. Many societies have to react by increasing that minimum opening amount, thus reducing opportunities for the smaller savers of the future. The result is destabilisation across the financial sector, with money circulating between institutions for entirely inappropriate reasons. That has a knock-on effect on the levels of service that genuine customers receive.

I urge the Minister to take a lead so as to prevent hostile takeovers and hostile conversions into banks. As building societies are accountable to their members, in the short term the trust lies in their hands. As Members of Parliament and as Ministers, we can plan for the longer term, and we can make those individual members aware of the decisions before them. Many people do not realise what an important role building societies play. They ensure that home owners and savers get a good deal.

Building societies and mutuality are a good thing for today and for the longer term. I hope that the Minister will do all he can to ensure that the future of mutual building societies is made secure.

5.31 pm

The Paymaster General (Mr. Geoffrey Robinson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) on an outstanding maiden speech. Her seriousness of approach and the tone and subject of her speech stand in marked contradistinction to those of her predecessor, whose sartorial colour exceeded his sense and whose verbal noise at times exceeded his wisdom. She has already shown herself to be a different proposition, and we are reassured that she intends to train her guns on the Opposition and not on her own troops. We remember how effective her campaign for Guy's hospital was, and hope that she will continue in that constructive vein.

I also welcome to the debate my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown), in whose constituency the headquarters of Nationwide building society are situated. As she rightly said, Nationwide is the subject of considerable speculation. I read in one of the Sunday newspapers about some eccentric proposals from Mr. Michael Harden.

Before I reply to the questions put by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North, I must say to both my hon. Friends that, under present legislation, it is up to the members of the society to decide their own future, and there is no immediate or realistic prospect of changing that. I hope that those members who are listening or who read the proceedings of this most appropriately initiated Adjournment debate will take careful note of what my hon. Friends have said about how societies should conduct their affairs. But for the moment it is down to the members and likely to remain so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North asked three questions. She asked me to consider the long-term effects of conversions on customers, on home ownership and on savings, especially for people on lower incomes. We shall certainly examine that, but she should

be reassured that the experience to date has not been discouraging. Abbey National, which was the first mutual society to convert, has largely maintained its customer profile. If one thinks about it, it would be strange if it did not, because that is where its expertise lies and where its customer base is, and unless, for some unknown and perverse reason, it is intent on cutting off its nose to spite its face, it is where the base of its business will continue to lie. Therefore, the experience to date is good.

I am also pleased to say that the Halifax and Woolwich, which are in the process of converting, have said that they intend to follow that example and will not depart from the principles and practice of business that have served them so well in the past. We shall certainly keep the matter under review, but the evidence to date is encouraging.

My hon. Friend asked me to examine individual savings accounts. Our manifesto referred to ways of encouraging saving schemes that embody the mutual principles. My hon. Friend said that we should ensure that individual savings accounts are accessible to low-income earners in particular. That is of the essence when one thinks of the mutual principles, and is very much at the heart of our thinking. The whole idea is to encourage saving among those who do not have most to save and who are not most naturally inclined to do so. That is an essential element of the proposals for individual savings accounts, which I am sure we shall introduce in the not-too-distant future.

My hon. Friend's third question was whether we would commit ourselves to—or review our attitude towards—the long-term benefits that building societies offer. We are only too well aware of the advantages that societies provide. They no longer dominate the mortgage and savings markets as they once did, but they provide a crucial element of competition. Week after week, societies continue to feature strongly among the best buys in the personal finance sections of the press for borrowers and savers. That is why, when we were in opposition, we participated fully in the all-party agreement to get the Building Societies Act 1997 on the statute book. We cannot prevent conversions, but we can push in a certain direction, and that legislation enables building societies to have greater operational flexibility while remaining mutual. By encouraging best practice, we can meet the objectives that my hon. Friends are anxious we should achieve.

Ms Drown: The Minister referred to the way in which converted building societies retain their value for their customers. In the press this weekend, I noted some surveys of staff who were employed in building societies that had converted to banks. The staff thought that the culture had changed and that the customer is no longer the pivotal focus of the institutions' concerns. That is quite worrying. We support building societies because we feel that the customer should be retained as the focus of the institution.

Mr. Robinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing my attention to those surveys. I am sure that, in turn, we can draw her remarks to the attention of the managements of the mutual societies that are in the process of conversion and of Abbey National, which has already converted. The purpose of the debate is to air those issues and to stress how important it is for the inherent advantages and principles of mutual societies to be continued even after conversion.

Building societies of the future will be the safe homes for savings and the trusted providers of mortgages that they have always been. However, the 1997 Act will enable them to indulge in a wider range of financial and other services. There are certain restrictions, such as derivatives, but, given the Barings experience, it is probably just as well to keep out of that. Even with those restrictions, societies could do a great deal more while remaining mutual and retaining the benefits that mutual status implies. Arrangements in the 1997 Act should ensure that the essential focus does not change. Institutions will be concerned predominantly with residential mortgage lending, which, in the future as in the past, will be funded in part by the savings of their members. They will remain committed to the home loans market at all times.

One of the other principal objectives of the legislation that was introduced earlier in the year, when we were in opposition, was to ensure that building societies did not drift in and out as economic conditions changed, as other banks do, but would remain committed to residential mortgage lending, financed, at least in part, by the savings of their members.

I hope that both my hon. Friends will be pleased to hear that the Act has done nothing to remove the substantial hurdles that must be overcome by those who choose to leave the sector. The five-year protection from takeover will disappear if building societies, having converted from mutual status, mount hostile takeovers of companies that wish to remain mutual societies. Although neither of my hon. Friends raised that point, it is very much in the mind of Nationwide, whose headquarters are in Swindon and which has a subsidiary headquarters in Northampton.

As every building society will say, building societies are in business for the good of their members. As mutuals, they can have no other aim. Over the years, they have prided themselves on providing high levels of service, innovative products and attractive and competitive rates. Many have grown from small local organisations serving a few hundred people to regional and, in some cases, national operations with millions of members. It is not possible to do that without meeting a real public need, and meeting it in an effective and efficient way.

There is no reason why societies should not continue to build on their past success. The markets in which they operate are as vital as they ever were, and the legislation that the House passed only a few months ago means that they can respond to new challenges with a freedom and flexibility that they have never enjoyed before.

I hope that, following the debate, societies that wish to remain mutual will consider their future to have been enhanced. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North on raising the matter, and also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon on her speech. The immediate future of building societies must, however, be in their own hands. The House has given them a new and unprecedented opportunity, and I am sure that we all wish them well.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eighteen minutes to Six o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 24 June 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

KING'S COLLEGE LONDON BILL *[Lords]*

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 1 July.

SELECTION

Ordered,

That Mr. Andrew MacKay be discharged from the Committee of Selection and Mr. Peter Ainsworth be added to the Committee.—*[Ms Bridget Prentice.]*

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

Breast Cancer

1. **Ms Atherton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the average waiting time for a woman with suspected breast cancer between referral by her general practitioner and receiving a diagnosis. [3466]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): My hon. Friend will no doubt be as surprised and dismayed as I was to discover that the Department of Health cannot provide a figure for the national average time women suspected of breast cancer have to wait for diagnosis after being referred by their general practitioner. I am determined to set up an information system that can supply such important facts.

As my hon. Friend knows, we are committed to reducing the time women with suspected breast cancer have to wait for diagnosis. That is why we have made £10 million available to promote the establishment of one-stop clinics, to ensure that tests can be carried out and results given more quickly and to allow all women to benefit from quicker access to treatment provided by specialist teams.

Ms Atherton: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Will he take the opportunity to reassure women that the Government are determined to ensure that breast cancer screening is safe and effective? Will he further assure the House that the Government will leave no stone unturned in their efforts to discover exactly what took place in Devon and to ensure that every action is taken to remedy the position?

Mr. Dobson: As my hon. Friend knows, on 9 June I asked the chief medical officer to set in train a review of what had happened in east Devon and to report to me on that and on any general implications for the breast cancer screening service nationally. The review panel has visited Exeter. It has further investigations to conduct and I expect it to report in July; when I receive that report, I shall publish it.

Sir Peter Emery: The right hon. Gentleman has been very honest with the House, but I want to keep him up to speed. Some people are still uncertain about their screening results; therefore, there is a real need to press on with the review. I am sorry to hear that the report is unlikely to be produced until the middle of July. I had hoped that it would have been completed by the end of June. It is essential that the information is made available, because the worry that has been caused can be understood only by someone who has experienced it. May I press that issue as hard as possible on the right hon. Gentleman?

Mr. Dobson: I understand the points that the right hon. Gentleman makes. Let me emphasise that any women in Devon who are concerned about their health should use the helpline or get in touch with their GPs or the hospital to arrange to have a further check. The establishment and conduct of the review should do nothing to inhibit anyone who may need to go back for a further check.

Mr. Tyler: The Secretary of State is aware of my constituency interest in the failure of the breast screening service in Devon and Cornwall. Will he confirm that the current inquiries are being extended into Cornwall, where one of the consultants concerned provided that service and where there is continuing anxiety among people served by the Treliske hospital?

Mr. Dobson: As I understand the position, one of the consultants involved in the failures in Exeter was also involved in failures at Treliske hospital in Cornwall. One of the review's purposes will be to discover how people can fail in one place and then move on to another.

Mr. Gunnell: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on switching resources so early to this issue from the extra bureaucracy with which the previous Government left the health service. Will he consider the delays that frequently occur between women receiving a diagnosis, having an operation and then having radiotherapy treatment? Some people in Leeds certainly experienced a delay in obtaining the treatment they needed. Will my right hon. Friend find out what is going on, so that when he is in a position to move more money from bureaucracy, he knows where to spend it?

Mr. Dobson: The proposals for the concentration of cancer diagnosis and treatment services—the Calman-Hine proposals—are intended to improve the performance of the national health service generally in cancer detection and treatment. Those proposals should be helping the situation in Leeds. If they are not, I will take the matter up with the health authorities and trusts in Leeds. Whatever the general arrangements, local management need to do their job in ensuring that the resources available are deployed properly and that the clinicians do their job properly. If those requirements are not met, we will not get the service that women need and deserve, whatever system is in place.

Infant Health

2. **Mr. Brazier:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the indicators of the health of babies and very young children have changed since 1979. [3467]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Paul Boateng): Infant mortality rates are often used as an indicator of children's overall health status. They have been falling since the inception of the NHS under a Labour Government.

Mr. Brazier: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that answer, but he did not answer the question. Had he done so, he would have had to reveal that almost all the indicators of health among children and babies improved during the Conservative Government's time in office, showing that the NHS was safe in our hands. Will he join me in congratulating the Kent and Canterbury paediatric and maternity units on their excellent work and their imaginative pooling of resources with neighbouring trusts to provide the critical mass necessary for the training of junior doctors?

Mr. Boateng: I am delighted to congratulate the Kent and Canterbury paediatric unit. Its good work is in no way due to the efforts of the previous Government, because they ran the national health service down. I warn the hon. Gentleman against complacency, not least because the incidence of asthma among young children has more than trebled since 1979. The public health measures taken by the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell), will attempt to deal with that problem.

Mr. Sheerman: Will my hon. Friend consider a special group of babies and young children—those who are born to the poorest families, often in urban centres, with parents who are unemployed and on benefit—because worrying research reports suggest that the health of that group is deteriorating, while average levels of health are rising?

Mr. Boateng: I share my hon. Friend's concern, not least because the infant mortality rate is one and a half times higher for poorer families than for wealthy families. This Labour Government will address that cause for concern.

Mr. Maples: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that in no circumstances will the parents of young children who are ill have to contribute financially to the costs of their medical treatment?

Mr. Boateng: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his position of leadership in opposition. He asks an important question. He knows that we are determined to ensure that the NHS gives value for money and that the resources at its disposal are used for the benefit of all patients. That will be the issue that is addressed by this Government.

Madam Speaker: Dr. Phyllis Starkey.

Dr. Starkey: Question 19, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I am calling the hon. Lady to ask a supplementary on Question 2. If she does not wish to do so, we shall go on to the next question.

EU Health Council

4. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the outcome of the June EU Health Council meeting. [3469]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Ms Tessa Jowell): I represented the Government at the meeting. The Council adopted a decision on a Community action programme on health monitoring and a common position on a proposed Community network for the surveillance of communicable diseases. It also discussed a communication from the Commission on combating tobacco consumption, and a presidency paper on blood safety and self-sufficiency in the Community.

Mr. Cunningham: Did my hon. Friend also discuss at the Council the impact of poor housing and environment, and of poverty in general, on public health?

Ms Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As that was my first Health Council meeting, I briefed other European Health Ministers on my appointment as the United Kingdom Government's first Minister for public health, and made clear our Government's commitment to tackle the inequalities that compromise the health of children and adults in this country.

NHS Trusts (Debt)

6. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hospital trusts have notified his Department that they will be in debt in the current year; and if he will make a statement. [3471]

Mr. Dobson: I am sure that my hon. Friend will be interested to know that, as part of the unfortunate legacy that we inherited from the outgoing Tory Government, 128 NHS trusts out of a total of 429 entered the current financial year in deficit, as did 59 of the 100 health authorities. I have asked the trusts to submit to me by July their revised financial plans for the current year; then I shall be able to find out what debt they expect to be in at the end of the year.

Mr. Skinner: Does my right hon. Friend, like the rest of us on the Government side of the House, acknowledge that those figures are appalling, as is the fact that when Labour assumed office there were 1,164,000 people on the waiting list? The Tory Government's grand Frankenstein experiment of meddling with the national health service, and trying to privatise it without telling the British people what they were doing, has resulted in misery for millions of people.

I wish my right hon. Friend well in his shuffling of the pack at the national health service, moving money from one area to another, but does he agree—I shall help him here, so I hope that he does—that next Wednesday, when the Budget is announced, it will be essential for his Department to receive more money? Does he agree that we need to raise additional revenue, so that after five years the national health service will be in as grand a condition as it was when we kicked it off in 1945?

Mr. Dobson: I should explain to my hon. Friend that even the figures that I announced in my main answer were

achieved only because health authorities and trusts failed to pay their creditors as quickly as they should have done—"doing a Hezza", I think it is called—and also transferred funds from capital to revenue. That demonstrates what a desperate situation they were in.

For the time being, all I can say about the funding of the health service is that far too much money is going into the bureaucracy, and that we have arranged for £100 million of that to be transferred to patient care this year. We also revealed, in the recent report, that between £80 million and £100 million has been wasted by prescription fraud, about which the previous Government did nothing.

We must ensure that every penny available to the national health service is spent as it ought to be, not lost through fraud or the bureaucratic nonsense of the internal market that the previous Government introduced—

Mr. Forth: Waffle.

Mr. Dobson: There certainly is a vast amount of waffle in the national health service at the moment, and it is there because of the internal market, which is draining funds out of patient care.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Although I accept that the Secretary of State is trying to find relatively small beer in the NHS Budget, may I take him back to the central question, which not only the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) but pretty much everyone in the country is asking? Given that Labour Ministers clearly knew the score before the election as to how much the NHS was in debt, and given that all the advice he receives is that the NHS needs more money, does the Secretary of State sign up to the Cabinet policy that there will be no additional money for the NHS this year and next? Will the Budget remain for two years at the limit inherited from the Tories, or is he arguing around the Cabinet table for something different?

Mr. Dobson: For a start, it is worth reminding everybody that the NHS spends £36 billion a year—a lot of money—and some of that money could be better deployed in improving services. We are setting about that, and we are keeping all our election promises. We promised that we would have a comprehensive spending review, that we would shift funds from bureaucracy into patient care and that we would target that money initially on breast cancer treatment. We are carrying out those promises, and we will continue to meet our obligations and keep all the promises that we made.

Mrs. Brinton: Is my right hon. Friend aware that today the Peterborough Hospitals NHS trust has announced that, by March 1998, it will face a £2 million overspend and that, to avert that overspend, it will have to close a theatre and drastically reduce beds? In view of that, will he assure me that, when considering hospitals for flagshipping for the private finance initiative, Peterborough will have top priority?

Mr. Dobson: My hon. Friend draws attention to yet another Tory failure. The Tories talked and talked about getting private finance for the building of hospitals, and spent £30 million on consultants' fees, but they never got a single brick laid in any hospital. The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), is working on that matter. Before long, work will start on the PFI hospitals that the previous Government failed to deliver.

Mr. Jack: So far, all we have heard from the Secretary of State is waffle; we have had no straight answer to questions on the resourcing of the health service. His "savings" amount to the equivalent of one additional day's resources. On my first appearance at the Dispatch Box for Health questions, may I try to be helpful to the Secretary of State by offering him an opportunity to save some £740 million? He may be aware of the excellent work done at the Devonshire Road hospital in Blackpool on the treatment of osteoporosis. If that work were done widely in the NHS, some £740 million could be saved and 40 premature deaths a day could be prevented. On World Osteoporosis Day, may I ask him to include in his fundamental review of the health service a thorough re-examination of the way in which osteoporosis is treated in the NHS?

Mr. Dobson: It beggars belief that a former Treasury Minister can get up and belabour us for inefficiency, as he sees it, in the NHS for which we have been responsible for eight weeks after 18 years of Tory responsibility.

Mr. Jack: What about osteoporosis?

Mr. Dobson: The right hon. Gentleman has mastered the word "osteoporosis" and we all admire his efforts.

There are many areas within the NHS where we can improve the way in which money is spent, and that is one reason why we are having a fundamental comprehensive review. We will include that in the review. But I must ask the right hon. Gentleman—why did his lot not review that years ago?

EU Health Council

7. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the outcome of the recent meeting of the European Union Health Council in respect of matters relating to mental health. [3472]

Mr. Boateng: Mental health was not discussed at the European Union Health Council. Of course, the issue is a concern to member states and to this Government. We want to ensure that mental health problems are addressed through good-quality, effective services, which are sensitive to individual service users' needs, allowing them to achieve their full potential.

Dr. Godman: Is any attempt being made by the Council of Ministers to establish good standards of practice in the treatment of those individuals with psychiatric illnesses? In particular, are the guidelines published by the Royal College of Psychiatrists for the use of electro-convulsive therapy for certain psychiatric illnesses followed by other medical authorities elsewhere in the European Union?

Mr. Boateng: We will certainly commend the guidelines produced by the royal college to the European Union Health Council. They are very helpful. When

I meet the college in a few weeks' time, I shall also be discussing how the Department can ensure that the information that we collect on the number of ECT treatments can be brought together better. As my hon. Friend knows, in 1991 the Department ceased to collect those figures centrally. We want to re-examine that decision and we shall do so with the assistance of the royal college.

Health Authorities Act 1995

8. **Mr. Whittingdale:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment has been made of the likely savings to be made for patient care as a result of the Health Authorities Act 1995. [3473]

20. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the projected savings to the national health service from the implementation of the Health Authorities Act 1995. [3486]

Mr. Milburn: It is estimated that annual savings of around £150 million were made as a result of the 1995 Act, but it took three years to get there. We have already announced a £100 million reduction in management costs to be achieved in the current year alone and we are looking carefully at the scope for further savings in 1998-99 and beyond.

Mr. Whittingdale: Given that answer, can the hon. Gentleman say whether he still supports the establishment of a regional tier of administration for the national health service, as was called for in his party's policy document "Renewing the NHS"?

Mr. Milburn: We have no plans to reinstate regional health authorities.

Mr. Forth: That sounds a bit bizarre to me. Was the Minister's party not the party which opposed the 1995 Act and all the savings that he has just told the House flowed from it? Has he not now admitted that he has done a U-turn on one of the undertakings in his party's policy document? How can we place any credibility on the Government's undertakings about savings in the NHS if, on the one hand, they opposed the measures that gave real savings—our measures—and, on the other, the hon. Gentleman is going back on his policy?

Mr. Milburn: I know that the right hon. Gentleman wants to dwell on the past. That is because he and the Conservative party represent the past—they are living in the past. As he well knows, the Conservative party is not the enemy but the friend of red tape. It increased bureaucracy in the NHS and gave us more invoices, more paper, more red tape, more managers, more administrators and more accountants—but it gave us fewer nurses.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: As well as the savings from cutting red tape, which can be diverted into patient care, does my hon. Friend agree that another potentially fruitful source of resources could be made available to the health service by removing the problem of bed blocking, whereby patients cannot be moved from health authority hospitals, where they cost more than £1,000 a week, to old people's homes or nursing homes, where they would be looked after for £300 or £400 a week or less, because local social services departments do not have the money to pay for the patients' stay in an old people's home? Does he agree that if local authority social service departments—with their present bankrupt budgets—and health authorities could co-ordinate their budgets more tightly, savings of about £700 a week per patient could be achieved by removing that bed blocking problem?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. As he will be aware, the interface between personal social services and the health service is crucial in ensuring that very vulnerable people in the community are cared for—particularly the elderly, but also people with disabilities and mental health problems. Sometimes, the gaps in provision mean that such people are not looked after in the most appropriate way.

My hon. Friend should consider two points: first, in planning for this winter, we will expect health authorities and local authorities to work closely together, precisely to achieve the co-operation that he advocates. Secondly, in the longer term, we will consider how best to pool resources to ensure that the gaps between social care and health care are closed.

Mr. Hogg: Does the Minister accept that any savings that he might make through the Health Authorities Act 1995 would be dwarfed by the additional costs attributable to the minimum wage and to any restrictions that might be placed on competitive tendering?

Mr. Milburn: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is the master of the red herring—although, in view of his former responsibilities, I apologise for the unintended pun. The Government are committed to ensuring that, in the future, health service resources go where they are most needed: not into back-line bureaucracy but into front-line patient services, where they should have gone in the first place.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On the question of savings, my hon. Friend the Minister will have heard my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State say that he expected to receive financial plans from health authorities, and trusts in particular, by a date in July. May we therefore assume that the documents submitted by trusts will include their proposals for reducing deficits by 1 April 1998?

Mr. Milburn: It is important that all trusts and health authorities should set out clearly how they intend to cope with the financial deficits that many of them have, often through no fault of their own. We will scrutinise extremely carefully the plans from both health authorities and trusts, to ensure that they maximise value for money, and also lead to improvements in patient care.

Dr. Harris: Given the Minister's surprising answer to the original question on health authorities, how will the Government bring back the necessary strategic planning, democratic accountability and openness in local services without a regional tier of health authorities?

Mr. Milburn: As the hon. Gentleman knows fine well from his experience in the national health service, there is a regional tier. We intend to work through the regional offices to ensure, for example, that capital developments

in the NHS are much more strategically planned. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said a few minutes ago, we will no longer countenance a situation in which the private finance initiative is driven by the needs of the market; instead, we would expect regional offices to identify those capital schemes that best meet strategic health needs in their areas. We are, as it were, reinstating strategic planning at a regional level.

National Screening Programmes

10. **Liz Blackman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has for improving the reliability of national screening programmes. [3475]

16. **Laura Moffatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the breast cancer screening programme. [3482]

Mr. Dobson: Breast and cervical cancer screening remain the best method of detecting breast and cervical cancers early so that women can get treatment as quickly as possible. It is vital therefore that women can be confident about the quality of that screening. That is why everyone is so disturbed by the record of failure in breast cancer screening in East Devon NHS trust and in cervical cancer screening in Kent and Canterbury NHS trust.

Arrangements have already been set in train for the chief medical officer to conduct an inquiry into what has been happening in east Devon. At my request, Sir William Wells, the chair of South Thames regional office, has set up an independent inquiry into the lamentable failure of the cervical cancer screening services in Kent and Canterbury, and the equally lamentable failure of the management to deal with the situation. He has accepted the resignation of the chair and chief executive.

Liz Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer, which will give great reassurance to many women. A significant number of women in the target groups do not take up invitations to go for screening. The figure varies between 16 and 34 per cent. in different health authorities. Those women do not come forward for a variety of reasons: they lead busy lives, work anti-social hours or do not regard themselves as a high priority. Does he have proposals to encourage such women to come forward to take advantage of the screening programme?

Mr. Dobson: As I think my hon. Friend knows, the target take-up rate for breast cancer screening nationally is 70 per cent. of women in target age groups. That is exceeded in every region except North Thames, but that figure does not apply to quite a lot of women in badly deprived areas or to substantial numbers of women among various ethnic groups. I have asked that special measures be taken both in North Thames and in other areas to lift the take-up rate in such groups. I have also asked officials to consider whether the 70 per cent. target is reasonable.

Laura Moffatt: In Crawley, ethnic groups form about 10 per cent. of the population. For all sorts of reasons, women in those groups do not come forward. They may have problems understanding what the test is about and be worried about the people who will deal with them if they do come forward. I am thrilled that my right hon. Friend is keen to examine the issue of getting people to breast screening programmes. Is there any way that we could talk to the voluntary organisations that deal with the different ethnic groups about the language that is used and the way in which screening is done? The plans that he mentioned were great, but we need to consider how we get people to come forward.

Mr. Dobson: I support the propositions that my hon. Friend puts forward, both from her political knowledge and from her professional knowledge as a nurse. Speaking as one privileged to represent the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson hospital, I can say she might have added that, for some ethnic minority women, a guarantee that they would be dealt with by women would undoubtedly help to raise the take-up rate.

Mr. Baldry: The right hon. Gentleman has talked about shifting resources from elsewhere in the NHS to breast cancer. There has been much rhetoric about red tape, bureaucracy and reviews. Can he make clear what reviews are taking place in the NHS? What are their timetables? When will work be completed? Will he give an undertaking that their results will be transparent, so that we shall be able to compare what the Government say about NHS bureaucracy with what is there now to manage a system that spends £42 billion a year?

Mr. Dobson: For a start, £10 million has been shifted into breast cancer treatment. That is half the sum saved by not proceeding with the eighth wave of fundholding: £20 million of the NHS budget had been earmarked for the paperwork of the additional wave. It has been shifted not from anything useful but into something useful. I would have hoped that everyone would welcome that. I have made it clear that the chief medical officer's review of screening provision in the south-west, and the review being carried out by Sir William Wells of cervical cancer screening services in Kent and Canterbury, will be reported to me and published.

Rev. Martin Smyth: When we think of a 70 per cent. target for take-up, is the other 30 per cent. made up mainly of people in deprived or rural areas? Is there an opportunity to use mobile screening units, as promoted by Action Cancer in my constituency, which go out to where people are so that they do not have to wait to go to specialist centres?

Mr. Dobson: Generally speaking, women who are better off and better informed get more screening than women who are worse off and worse informed. Therefore, we have to do everything that we can to target any effort to improve the take-up rate on the worst off and worst informed. Techniques such as the one that the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned and those mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) are all being applied in various parts of the country. I want to see them stepped up because I am not satisfied with the present level of take-up.

Primary Health Care

11. **Ms Perham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about his plans for improving primary health care. [3476]

Madam Speaker: I have called Question 11.

Hon. Members: Come on!

Mr. Dobson: I thought that I could have a bit of a rest, Madam Speaker. Primary care services are the first contact that most patients have with the national health service. Up and down the country, there are innumerable examples of very high quality services being provided by dedicated primary care professionals. The Government are determined to build on the achievements of those professionals, encouraging excellence and innovation and helping all practices to attain the standards of the best.

We have begun to release primary care from the bureaucratic excesses of the internal market and we are working to ensure that non-fundholding practices and their patients are no longer at a disadvantage.

Ms Perham: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the waste of money on bureaucracy and the state of the health service were the issues that most concerned people in Ilford, North during the election campaign? My right hon. Friend touched on prescription fraud in his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner). I understand that it costs about £100 million a year, which means that each health authority could spend an extra £1 million on 145 heart by-pass operations or even 222 hip replacements. That scale of deception was allowed to go on by the Conservative party. How does my right hon. Friend intend to tackle the scandal?

Mr. Dobson: The first point to make is that the vast majority of patients, doctors and pharmacists are decent and honest and have had nothing to do with the scandalous level of prescription fraud. However, there are a limited number of villains among all three categories and we are determined that they will be stopped. One of the problems—this is another matter for our general review of the NHS—is that the system as operated at present is scandalously open to fraud. We have to make it less open to fraud, while not imposing additional bureaucratic burdens or making life difficult for patients who have to deal with their doctor and pharmacist.

Mr. Maples: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, one of the things that are useful in planning the future of primary health care is to know the future of funding levels. In the past 18 years, spending in the NHS has risen in real terms by an average of 3.1 per cent. a year. Can the right hon. Gentleman commit himself to matching that performance over the lifetime of this Parliament?

Mr. Dobson: We are committed in our manifesto to a real increase—

Mr. Maples: Three per cent.

Mr. Dobson: The hon. Gentleman apparently wants to give the answers as well as ask the questions. That would be more understandable if he had shifted straight from one side of the House to the other, but he has had a five-year interval before doing so. I repeat that, in our election manifesto, we said that there would be an increase in real terms every year under the Labour Government.

Waiting Times

12. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS in–patients were waiting over one year for treatment (a) in March 1979 and (b) in the latest month for which figures are available. [3477]

Ms Jowell: On 31 March 1979, there were 185,195 patients waiting more than 12 months for treatment at national health service hospitals—an increase of 24 per cent. over the previous year. The provisional figure for 31 March 1997, the latest available, is 31,318, which represents a 580 per cent. increase in those numbers over the past year. The highest-ever recorded March figure for patients waiting more than one year was the 223,311 who were waiting in March 1989. We now have the highest-ever number of patients waiting—more than 1.1 million.

Mr. St. Aubyn: In view of the reply that the numbers waiting more than one year fell during the period of the previous Government from 185,000 to just 31,000, do the Minister and her colleagues continue to denigrate the previous Government's record on health because they think that waiting lists do not matter; or, if they think that they do matter, what commitment is the Minister prepared to make today to exceed the previous Government's outstanding record of cutting waiting lists to such an extent?

Ms Jowell: We would not set our sights so low as to try to exceed the record of the previous Government. There are 1.1 million patients waiting for treatment—the highest-ever recorded figure. That was the last Government's legacy to the people using the national health service. It is a shameful legacy. We have made promises to patients and we shall keep the promises we made.

Mr. Corbett: Is not the main reason for those appalling figures the indifference to the number of acute surgical and medical beds available to provide such treatment in our hospitals? Will my hon. Friend give an instruction to Mr. Bryan Stoten, who chairs the Birmingham health authority, that, when considering the reorganisation of hospitals in Birmingham, it is bed numbers in those categories that matter, and not his attempt to fulfil his ambition of getting rid of all but one or two of the city's hospitals?

Ms Jowell: My hon. Friend makes an important point in underlining the increase in the number of emergency admissions, which has been a steady trend in recent years for a number of different reasons. The increase in emergency admissions certainly has an impact on the rate at which elective surgery is performed. As for the situation in Birmingham, I am sure that my hon. Friend, who is a Birmingham Member of Parliament, and my hon. Friend the Minister of State will discuss with other Birmingham Members of Parliament the need to maintain a proper balance in patient capacity in line with the development of community and primary care.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is not only the numbers of people on waiting lists that are important, but the length of time that those people are

on the waiting lists? Does she also agree that cases have to be prioritised? How does she believe that she can improve on the figures that she has inherited if further increased resources, year on year, are not made available?

Ms Jowell: Patients on waiting lists want to be sure of the rate at which they will be treated and that they will be admitted to hospital and treated according to the severity of their condition. In recent years, there has been a collapse of public confidence that patients will be treated on the basis of clinical need and the severity of their illness. Our commitment on breast cancer and eliminating waits for breast cancer surgery is an important step in reassuring women, thousands of whom waited unacceptable lengths of time as a result of previous Government policy.

Private Finance Initiative

13. **Mr. Singh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money has been spent by the NHS on consultancy fees relating to proposed PFI schemes. [3478]

Mr. Milburn: Information is now collected centrally on total expenditure on fees for external consultants involved in major PFI schemes. The total amount which has been spent on leading schemes by NHS trusts in legal fees and advice is £30 million. The total amount spent on all major PFI schemes, including those at an earlier stage, is £37 million.

Mr. Singh: I thank the Minister for his reply and ask him whether he is as shocked as I am at that utter waste of public money by the previous Government. Can he confirm that, within weeks of taking office, the present Government have honoured their manifesto pledge to break the logjam in the PFI in the NHS, and does that not prove that, unlike the Conservatives, we keep our promises on health?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That £30 million could have bought an extra 7,500 hip replacement operations; so the £30 million legal fees bill that NHS trusts have faced has not only been a waste of taxpayer's resources but robbed patients of the money that they need for investment in front-line care. I can promise my hon. Friend that not only will we make the PFI work, but we shall cut through the PFI red tape bill to ensure that public money is spent on front-line patient services rather than on exorbitant advisers' fees.

Mr. Keith Simpson: If the Minister is anxious to save money in national health service, may I take it that he continues to support compulsory competitive tendering in the NHS?

Mr. Milburn: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, we are conducting a comprehensive spending review and those issues will be considered in the context of the review. I should make it abundantly clear that the parameters of the review will be our manifesto commitments to ensure that the NHS is there for people when they need it, and that it is based on need, not ability to pay.

14. **Ms Drown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking (a) to speed up decisions on private finance initiative schemes and (b) to ensure public-private partnerships in NHS capital schemes properly meet the needs of patients and staff. [3480]

Mr. Milburn: The NHS (Private Finance) Bill 1997 will confirm NHS trusts' powers to enter into PFI contracts. That will provide the private sector with the reassurance that it needs to enter into PFI contracts and enable the two major acute hospital PFI schemes, at Norfolk and Norwich and at Dartford and Gravesham, to proceed to financial close.

I announced on 10 June an urgent exercise to prioritise all the other major acute hospital capital schemes currently testing for PFI. An announcement on which schemes have been selected to proceed will be made shortly. In future, all acute schemes will be prioritised and the PFI process will be streamlined.

Ms Drown: Does the Minister recognise the urgency of upgrading Swindon's Princess Margaret hospital, which has £42 million of backlog maintenance and is the No. 1 priority of the South and West region of our health service?

Mr. Milburn: I am of course aware of the urgent need that my hon. Friend's constituents feel about the PFI project in Swindon and of the representations that she and my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills) have made to me in that regard. I can promise that the criteria that we use will ensure that NHS need and the ability to deliver quickly will be the key criteria and that, as a consequence of prioritising and taking tough action now, we shall ensure that, in future, NHS hospitals are built by means of the PFI process.

Mr. Pickles: Before the Minister started his various reviews, there was a significant review of health needs in southern Essex and it was the unanimous view that an accident and emergency unit was necessary in Harold Wood hospital. That has gone through the PFI process and a preferred bidder is ready. Can we go ahead—or is further money to be expended on accountants and so on? Can my constituents look forward to the building of an emergency and accident unit in Harold Wood?

Mr. Milburn: I think that the hon. Gentleman is aware that the London review that the Secretary of State announced on Friday will specifically consider the relationship between Harold Wood and Oldchurch hospitals. If there are proposals for PFI, we shall consider them in the light of reporting from the London review panel.

Mr. Radice: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the steps that he is taking to speed up the PFI process. Will the Department carefully consider the case for a new general hospital at Dryburn being included in the first tranche?

Mr. Milburn: I am aware of the strong feelings in the north Durham area about the need for a new hospital there. As my hon. Friend is aware, it is the Secretary of State who will decide on schemes in the north and in the Yorkshire area. I reiterate to my hon. Friend that the intention behind the PFI prioritisation exercise is to achieve what the previous Government signally failed to achieve by means of the PFI: getting hospitals built.

Dr. Brand: I welcome the fact that the Minister will allow PFI projects to go forward only when they meet the

needs of patients and staff, but how confident is he that he knows what the needs of the health service will be over the whole period when a PFI arrangement may be in place, especially where services are involved?

Mr. Milburn: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, the assessment that we are undertaking—initially through the regional offices and then by Ministers—will include a number of criteria, of which NHS need is the most important. Of course, we shall consider carefully whether the schemes presented to us reflect high NHS need; equally, we shall consider whether they represent good value for money. Unless schemes can demonstrate that they improve risk transfer and that they represent good value for money, we shall not give them the go-ahead.

Paediatric Intensive Care

15. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will assess the need for paediatric intensive care provision in Chorley and South Ribble health district. [3481]

Mr. Boateng: My right hon. Friend has no plans to assess the paediatric intensive care provision for Chorley and South Ribble, which is currently provided by Manchester Children's Hospital NHS trust and the Royal Liverpool Children's NHS trust, with appropriate retrieval services. My hon. Friend will be glad to learn that there are on-going discussions between Chorley and South Ribble NHS trust and Preston Acute Hospitals NHS trust on the provision of paediatric services for his constituency.

Mr. Hoyle: I welcome that. I would, however, point out that expectant mothers and youngsters involved in accidents have to travel up to 20 miles to reach those hospitals. Chorley and South Ribble is an area with a large population, so will the Minister look into providing a new maternity unit with the full back-up of paediatric services?

Mr. Boateng: The provision of locally accessible services is obviously important. It will be considered by both the NHS trusts concerned, and anything that the Department can do to assist that consideration we certainly shall do.

Private Partnerships

18. **Mr. Heppell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the proportion of retired people who would be able to afford to take out private partnerships for long–term care. [3484]

Mr. Boateng: No useful assessment can be made, given the nature of the previous Government's partnership scheme and the multiplicity of factors that would govern its take-up.

Mr. Heppell: Does it not seem clear that private insurance can be of benefit only to a few, not to the majority of elderly people? Will the Government therefore introduce a charter for long-term care specifying what health authorities and social services departments will provide for older people in need of long-term care?

Mr. Boateng: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend—as did the overwhelming majority of people who responded to the former Government's consultation process on their ill-fated partnership scheme. It is our intention to ensure that there is a charter for long-term care so that all in receipt of such care have equal and fair access to higher-quality services. What matters is not whether the care is given in the private or public sector but whether the quality of the services, and the value for money that the public are entitled to expect of them, can be provided.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Did I hear the Minister say that he wants long-term care to be effectively transferred back to the NHS? Will he commit the Government to doing that, or to ensuring that people's homes are still maintained even if they have stopped living in them? Is that yet another spending commitment by the Government?

Mr. Boateng: The hon. Gentleman did not hear me correctly, but I suspect that he was not listening very hard. Had he been listening, he would have heard of our commitment to long-term care and our determination to ensure that the vulnerable people who need it get the best value for money. That is this Government's response to the crisis to which the previous Government helped to contribute.

Breast Cancer

19. **Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve breast cancer services for women. [3485]

Ms Jowell: The Government are committed to improving the provision and availability of high-quality cancer services and will direct savings achieved from cuts in the cost of NHS bureaucracy into patient care. As a first step, £10 million has been made available for breast cancer services to speed up access to diagnosis, reduce waiting times for treatment and support networks of specialist breast teams.

Dr. Starkey: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, which will reassure many women throughout the country. It is important that, once women have been diagnosed, they get the appropriate treatment. Will my hon. Friend outline the steps that are being taken to ensure that research is properly disseminated so that clinicians can take the right decisions on the most appropriate treatment for individual women?

Ms Jowell: An essential part of rebuilding a national health service is to ensure common and high standards of care, wherever women are treated. The Calman-Hine approach to cancer treatment could not be effectively implemented by the last Government because of the obstacle of the internal market. By implementing that, we can take a co-operative approach to treating people with cancer and guarantee the high quality to which my hon. Friend refers.

Denver Summit

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the summit of Eight held at Denver last weekend. I have placed in the Library of the House the communiqué and other documents issued following the summit.

One of the most stimulating discussions at Denver was on the need for structural reform in all our economies. Different countries face somewhat different problems, but we all face the challenge of how to take advantage of increasing globalisation and provide new job opportunities. In many countries, unemployment, particularly among young people, is far too high.

We need to combine greater labour market flexibility with action to improve work incentives, skills and employability, and reduce the risk of marginalisation. The summit welcomed the UK's plan to take forward work on that at a meeting of G8 Finance and Social Affairs Ministers in London early next year, and then at the Birmingham summit.

We also discussed the problem of transnational organised crime, which is a growing preoccupation for us all. Crime is becoming increasingly sophisticated and international, and criminals will quickly exploit the newest technologies to evade detection. We must fight them on their own ground, developing greater international co-operation and new techniques to match the threat.

Over the coming months, we shall work up specific proposals on co-operation against crime, including drug trafficking and financial crime, which we can then consider in detail at next year's summit.

In Denver, the Finance Ministers reported on the progress that they had made on measures to increase financial stability. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will lead the follow-up next year on plans further to improve co-operation between financial supervisors.

The summit focused particular attention on Africa. We agreed on the need to combat poverty through debt relief, improved market access and support for education. The priority is to focus assistance where it is most needed and will reap most benefit—that is, those countries that are introducing economic reforms and which respect the principles of human rights and good governance.

We emphasised the importance of not wasting money on unproductive, especially military, expenditure and of combating corruption. I announced that, over the next three years, Britain would increase by 50 per cent. our support for primary education, basic health care and clean water in sub-Saharan Africa.

We discussed United Nations reform, and welcomed the Secretary General's efforts. We encouraged him to undertake a system-wide review of the UN and its agencies. We agreed on the need to develop the UN's ability to prevent and resolve conflict, and we all recognised the need to solve the UN's funding crisis as soon as possible.

The leaders of the Seven also agreed to provide $300 million towards the cost of restoring the sarcophagus over the Chernobyl reactor to prevent any further leak of radioactive material.

I was pleased to get the strong support of all other leaders for our views on Hong Kong. The communiqué underlined the G8's durable interest in Hong Kong's stability and prosperity, and looked forward to democratic elections there for a new legislature as soon as possible.

Foreign Ministers discussed a number of regional and global issues, and presented a detailed report to Heads of Government. The summit issued a separate statement on Bosnia, reaffirming our commitment to the peace agreement, and backed efforts to achieve a lasting settlement in Cyprus. The communiqué also records unanimous support for progress towards a legally binding international agreement to ban anti-personnel land mines.

I welcome Russia's participation as a major partner in the summit of the Eight. President Yeltsin played a fuller role than ever before, and we agreed to continue our efforts to help Russia to integrate into the global economic system. Russia will shortly be participating as a creditor in the Paris Club.

We naturally devoted considerable time in Denver to environmental issues, many of which are being followed up at the UN General Assembly special session which opened yesterday.

There is much that we need to do to improve the environment we live in. Cleaner air, cleaner water, less congestion and better use of scarce resources matter to all of us. In developing countries, alleviating poverty is the key to sustainable development. We are committed over time to reversing the decline in Britain's development assistance that occurred under the previous Administration.

Much of the public attention, though, has focused on efforts to tackle the threat of global warming. We made some progress at Denver, which I hope to see consolidated at the UN session in New York. Everyone accepted that, by the time of the Kyoto conference later this year, we must agree binding targets for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions beyond the year 2000.

As the House will know, the European Union has already put forward proposals for a target reduction of 15 per cent. in greenhouse gases by the year 2010. The British Government have indicated their readiness to go further. We are already likely to achieve a reduction of 10 per cent. in greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2000.

Such targets are tough, but they are achievable by policies that are sensible in their own right: an integrated transport policy that makes public transport more attractive and gets traffic flowing more smoothly; increasing the use of renewable forms of energy; improving energy efficiency in firms and the public sector, bringing it up to the standards of the best, and increasing the use of combined heat and power; and improving energy efficiency in homes—for example, through promoting self-financing schemes by the energy suppliers.

Measures aimed at producing environmental benefits are often seen as burdensome or unachievable when they are first proposed, but experience shows that sensible measures produce sensible results—as we saw with measures to promote the use of unleaded petrol, for example.

We discussed a number of other key environmental issues, including the need to work for an international agreement on forests, with suitably high standards.

[The Prime Minister]

We also discussed how to increase access to clean water and sanitation, and how to improve international co-ordination of efforts to protect oceans and to manage fisheries.

This was my first G8 summit and I was struck by how much better the discussions were when we had time to focus on the key issues common to all our countries. Next year, I want to take that further and concentrate on fewer issues in greater depth. In some senses, it will mean a return to the original concept of G7 and G8 summits, using the opportunity for informal but substantive discussions.

At Birmingham, I want to concentrate in particular on two subjects: the issue of jobs and employability, and the challenge posed by organised crime. The first will be a major theme of our presidency of the European Union in the first half of next year. Both are of central importance to all the G8 countries.

I am grateful to the President of the United States for his hospitality at the Denver summit this year and to the authorities there, and I am grateful to the people of Birmingham for agreeing to host next year's summit, which I am confident will be an equal success.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. I welcome many aspects of the Denver summit, in particular the new and deeper participation by Russia, and the conclusions on Hong Kong and on closer co-operation in fighting organised crime.

Does the Prime Minister agree that there is often too much on the agenda at such summits? I welcome his readiness to continue the efforts of his predecessor to reduce their length and to give them sharper focus.

I welcome also the discussion at Denver about the need for structural reform of economies, and the section of the communiqué that calls on countries to

"increase the responsiveness of labor markets to economic conditions".

Does the Prime Minister recognise that the achievement of increased responsiveness in the United Kingdom is a vindication of the strategy adopted by the previous Government, and is one of the reasons why the new Government have inherited the best economic prospects in a generation? How will he continue to work towards that objective? How does he believe that he will be supported in that endeavour by introducing job-destroying rigidities, such as the social chapter, into the labour market?

I welcome also the acknowledgement that aging populations mean that

"Some of our countries face major challenges in sustaining their public pension systems".

Does the Prime Minister believe that the United Kingdom is one of those countries? If so, will he recognise that pension systems can be sustained better and future pensioners advantaged by pursuing innovative pensions policies rather than disparaging them?

The communiqué calls for "active aging strategies". Can the Prime Minister tell us what an active aging strategy is? Does he have one?

The Prime Minister referred also to aid for Africa and announced increased support for primary education and other projects in sub-Saharan Africa. That is a worthy objective, but from which budget will the additional funds be drawn?

I thank the Prime Minister for congratulating the previous Government in his speech in New York on their environmental achievements—although we wish that he had done so before. Will he remind the House that, thanks to the actions of the previous Government, this country is one of only three in the world that are on course to meet the Rio targets? Do the Government understand why that is so? Does the Prime Minister agree that successful free enterprise economies that are based on private ownership are in the best position to safeguard the natural environment, and that sensible incentives often work better than heavy-handed regulation?

What specific measures does the Prime Minister propose in order to achieve the additional 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions to which he is now committed? Can he clarify that commitment, as it was not in his statement to the House this afternoon? He mentioned policies to achieve that objective that are in place already or are so general as to be meaningless. When will he be able to shed more light on those proposals? Will they entail going back on statements made by his Industry Minister favouring coal-fired rather than gas-powered power stations? Will he pursue that target irrespective of the actions of other countries or only in concert with them?

The Denver summit failed to agree on new targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Does the Prime Minister share our dismay that the G8 failed to reach a new agreement, since real progress can be made only through international agreement? In the light of our special relationship with the United States, does the Prime Minister agree that it is regrettable that President Clinton did not accept the proposed new targets? How will the Prime Minister persuade him to do so? Is it not vital to have international agreement on targets for the decade ahead, just as targets for this decade were negotiated successfully by the previous Government at Rio?

Will the Prime Minister reassure the House that any increase in taxation in order to meet environmental objectives will be matched by reductions in other taxes so that legitimate environmental concerns are not used to justify large rises in the overall burden of taxation? The country wishes to know that, along with the fine words and the worthy objectives, the Government can produce some specific policies, successfully negotiate international agreements, and produce tax proposals that have the desired effect without damaging the growth of enterprise that, alone, provides the means of safeguarding our environment.

The Prime Minister: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new position. He asked what is an active aging strategy. The best active aging strategy that I know of is to be either Leader of the Opposition or Prime Minister—we shall see how we both fare in that regard. I welcome the fact that the right hon. Gentleman agreed with much of the Denver communiqué, particularly the points about organised crime, Hong Kong and the participation of Russia. That is precisely what I am saying in relation to G7 summits. It is important that they concentrate on fewer issues, but go through them in depth.

As for structural reform, the words "responsive to change" are those that the Government have been using. They mean not only more flexible labour markets but an emphasis on education and skills, and ensuring that people can be genuinely employable within new labour markets. Decent civilised standards of treatment for people at the workplace are not inconsistent with a prosperous economy.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about Africa, budgets there and the announcement of 50 per cent. more provision for basic education and health care. The money will be found within existing budgets as part of our policy of reallocating priorities and focusing our aid on the poorest countries. Commitments over the past three years have totalled about £240 million, and commitments over the next three years will therefore be increased to about £360 million.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me also about targets and the measures that we might take to meet those which we have set ourselves. I believe that the targets that we have set ourselves are achievable by continuing with the types of policy that we have been outlining over the past few weeks—for example, in relation to an integrated transport system, working with the rail operators to ensure that they make sure that more is done to integrate their services by introducing such things as through ticketing, giving people the real choice of being able to use public transport where they wish to do so and, in relation to improved energy efficiency in firms and the public sector, the energy efficiency best practice—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman asked me for the details, and I am giving them to him.

The energy efficiency best practice programme has a target of generating additional savings worth £800 million a year by the year 2000. We are well on target to achieve that. If we continue with the policies that we have outlined, we believe that we will meet that target. It is part of a continuing programme. As for improving energy efficiency in homes, not merely is the home energy efficiency scheme in being, but part of the new Government's proposals is the establishment of an environmental task force that will be specifically charged with assisting measures that will combat some of our environmental problems. In all these areas, we shall continue to make progress. I believe that we can meet the targets.

The right hon. Gentleman said that it was a pity that Denver G8 failed to reach agreement. It is a pity that we were unable to go further there. The key event, however, will be the Kyoto conference, which will take place later this year. The US has given an indication that it will be in a position then to agree legally binding targets for the future. If that can happen, that will be substantial progress. Yes, we would have liked to go further at Denver, but, as I have said, I think that the key issue is what happens at the Kyoto conference. I think that the possibilities there are good.

The right hon. Gentleman will have to await the Budget for any matters of taxation. I believe that the most important thing that we can do in respect of meeting the targets to which I have referred is to continue with the measures that relate especially to transport and energy efficiency, which we have already outlined. If we do that, we have the best chance of making a significant contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, which is what we all want to see.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): I join the Prime Minister, first, in welcoming the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) to leadership of the Conservative party. I think that I am right in saying that he is the sixth leader of one or other of the two parties, Conservative and Labour, that I have seen since becoming leader of mine. I wish him—*[Interruption.]* Look how I look, Madam Speaker? I look younger every day. I wish the right hon. Gentleman well in his task, which most people regard as impossible.

I very much welcome the thrust of the Prime Minister's statement. The Denver summit of Eight was obviously more successful than most of these summits and it achieved a number of notable things. I welcome particularly the inclusion of Russia. I especially welcome the clear statement on Hong Kong. It is, of course, the case that the Sino-British agreement is an international agreement. The fact that that will be observed in detail by the international community will be a great incentive to ensure that the agreement is carried out in full, especially in relation to the preservation of democracy.

I also welcome the clear statement on Bosnia. I am sure that the Prime Minister will agree that, unless the warring parties understand that they must make faster progress, there is a real possibility that the momentum for peace will slip away and the situation will slide back towards warfare and conflict, perhaps even in the very near future.

I regret that there was not greater agreement on the environment, although perhaps that was too much to ask. It is welcome to see the Prime Minister and the Government taking the lead on environmental matters. I am almost tempted to say that, once again, they seem to be observing more of our manifesto than theirs, but that would be curmudgeonly, so I shall not say it.

No doubt the Prime Minister was happy to see the newspaper headlines about his leadership when he returned. I remind him that I have seen those headlines before, and so has he. I remember the 1989 summit, from which the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher, returned to headlines—in *The Daily Telegraph* I think—saying, "Thatcher to save the planet" and "Thatcher dons green mantle for economic summit". The right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) had similar headlines. Does the Prime Minister realise that he will be judged not by the rhetoric or the newspaper headlines, but by results and actions?

We will look for those results when we consider next week's Budget. Will there be a move towards green taxation? Will there be a reduction of VAT on home insulation? Will there be a national home insulation programme? The Prime Minister cannot answer those questions now, but does he recognise that we will judge what he does rather than what he says? He will be judged by his actions and not by the rhetoric, although welcome, that he used in Denver and New York.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his agreement to much of what we did. I shall deal with his two main points.

We want faster progress in Bosnia. We want a far greater impetus towards implementing the Dayton agreement and greater pressure from the countries

[The Prime Minister]

involved to achieve that. I have been saying that for some time, as has President Clinton. If pressure to reach agreement is taken off those countries, there is a risk that the whole process will slip backwards; that would be desperately unfortunate. I agree whole-heartedly with the right hon. Gentleman on that.

On the environment, the right hon. Gentleman will have to wait for the Budget, as he knows. I agree that the issue is results and not rhetoric. In the programmes that we have already outlined, there is at least the prospect that results will be achieved. I believe that they are achievable, provided that the national will and the political will are there.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On Africa, does the Prime Minister recall that the one subject about which President Mandela wrote a personal letter to the previous Prime Minister was his unease about Libyan sanctions? The unease felt about Lockerbie has been outlined in 11 Adjournment debates. Will the Prime Minister also reflect on the Channel 4 programmes that cast grave doubt on whether the Libyans were responsible for the brutal and wicked murder of WPC Yvonne Fletcher? Before dismissing them merely as television speculation, will he take into account the fact that to do so he would have to suppose that George Styles, the senior ballistics officer of the British Army, does not know much about ballistics, that Hugh Thomas, who was the senior consultant at the Royal Victoria hospital in Belfast, does not know much about the angles at which bullets enter bodies, and that Bernard Knight, as the distinguished Home Office pathologist in charge of the Cromwell street investigation, does not know about pathology? Will he take this matter seriously?

The Prime Minister: As I said to my hon. Friend last week, the Libyan sanctions will remain until Libya complies with the United Nations Security Council resolutions. The Channel 4 programme was a follow-up to the original programme that was made some time last year. The continuing investigation into the murder of WPC Fletcher is a matter for the police, and anyone who has new evidence relating to the crime should pass it to them. The original extensive investigation by the Metropolitan police forensic science laboratory and the pathologist Dr. Ian West concluded that she was killed by a bullet fired from the Libyan People's Bureau. Every piece of new evidence has been reviewed, but my advice is that the view prevails that she was killed by a bullet from the Libyan People's Bureau.

The police are reviewing the contents of the programme broadcast on 5 June and they expect to have completed their analysis by the end of September. I do not hold out to my hon. Friend any prospect of change in that respect; I merely say that, whenever new evidence is presented or claims are made, they are investigated. However, the best advice that we have at the moment remains the original advice.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): As most greenhouse gases are produced by America, south America, China and the developing world, why is the Prime Minister determined to punish British people, particularly our rural constituents, by setting targets that go much further than those observed by the rest of the world and will be particularly damaging to Britain? Does he not agree that we should sign up unilaterally to targets for greenhouse gas emissions rather than trying to make a grand green gesture that will hurt our constituents?

The Prime Minister: It will not hurt our constituents at all. The agreement that was reached between European Union members for a 15 per cent. reduction in greenhouse gas emissions based on 1990 levels was negotiated by the Government of which the right hon. Gentleman was a member. We believe that we can go further, but, even on existing policy, by 2000 we will have achieved a 10 per cent. reduction.

Of course, we want other countries to go further. That is why we have put pressure on them. The Kyoto conference will provide an opportunity to see what progress has been made with the United States and other countries, but I believe that the measures that have been taken with the support of right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House have been to the advantage of our constituents. It will be to the advantage of our constituents if we reduce pollution and the damage that has been caused not merely to the world's climate, but to clean air in Britain.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): In relation to land mines, have other countries stated their intention to follow Britain's lead in banning the production, sale and trade in those horrible weapons?

The Prime Minister: No specific country is about to follow precisely the lines that we have articulated, but the importance of the words in the communiqué is that there is agreement in principle that we need an internationally binding agreement banning the sale of anti-personnel mines. We are making progress, but we still have a long way to go. The fact that Britain has taken a lead will help to achieve that international agreement.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Did the meeting take any opportunity to compare the economic reforms in the United States with those in the European Union? If so, were any conclusions drawn about the rather different approach taken in north America from that in Europe? Did the Prime Minister draw any conclusions about the direction that the European Union seems to wish to take, particularly in respect of labour market flexibility, and the disadvantage that that would inflict on the European Union in a globally competitive economy?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, it is important that we combine labour market flexibility with investment in people. The United States recognises that it has a significant problem in large numbers of young people in particular who are shut out from mainstream society without any hope or opportunity. That is something which our countries have to correct. It is not a one-way process: there is much to be learned on both sides. There are also measures that all countries agree make a difference to economic performance.

In contradistinction to the Opposition, I believe that there is a role for government, but that it is a different role today. It relates to infrastructure, education, technology and assisting small businesses and needs to be fulfilled here as well as in other countries.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I welcome the concentration by the G8 summit on

international crime and drug trafficking. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister mentioned specific proposals that are being worked up for discussion next year. What specific measures does Britain wish to see taken, with especial reference to the threat of organised crime emanating from Russian and eastern Europe?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. As the host of the G8 summit next year in Birmingham, we are expected to bring forward specific measures to combat organised crime. Already, the G8 working group has agreed some 40 detailed recommendations to counter transnational organised crime. Those are now being implemented, and include extradition proceedings, co-operation between law enforcement agencies and, specifically, attempts to track down the proceeds of drug trafficking. We hope that we will be able to take a significant step forward next year. One of the advantages of Russia's involvement in the summit is being able to talk face to face with the Russians about the measures they need to take to defeat the organised crime that often comes from Russia and is spreading across Europe.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): The Ulster Unionists also welcome the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition to his new position and look forward to working with him on many issues, including the important one of Northern Ireland. The importance of that subject was underlined by the fact that the Prime Minister, following his journey back to the United Kingdom, is already devoting several hours to it today. We thank the Prime Minister for the statement that he has given on the Denver summit and, in particular, the apparent contribution he made to the summit on behalf of our nation.

I welcome the communiqué's reference to a lasting settlement in Cyprus. Does the Prime Minister agree that a lasting settlement in Cyprus would be preferable before the accession of Cyprus as a member of the European Union? Does he agree that it is important that the Government's attitude to the Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities is even handed and, therefore, does he agree that the Government should follow the example of the previous Government and that the Foreign Secretary should meet the leaders of both communities in their respective parts of Cyprus?

The Prime Minister: On the latter point, I will let the right hon. Gentleman know exactly what is proposed. I am sure that there will be no objection to that. On the question of Cyprus, the possibility of accession negotiations taking place makes it all the more important that a settlement is achieved. The United Kingdom fully supports the UN-led search for a settlement. The prospects of EU accession and the need to reduce tension make that settlement all the more necessary.

We support the EU commitment to open accession negotiations with Cyprus six months after the end of the intergovernmental conference, which will be during our presidency, so we will have a leading role to play. The conclusions of the Denver summit underline the importance that the international community attaches to the issue, and I hope that we can move forward on it. The right hon. Gentleman will know that Richard Holbrooke has been appointed as the US presidential envoy and Sir David Hannay is the UK's special representative. I hope that their appointment will assist the process and help to develop ever greater urgency in the search for a settlement.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): While I am sure that the House welcomes my right hon. Friend's comments about tackling the problem of world poverty, will he indicate the time scale within which he thinks Britain will reach the UN target for development assistance?

The Prime Minister: No, I cannot put a specific time limit on it, because we will have to do it as we can. If my hon. Friend looks back at the record of the previous Labour Government, she will see that we made tremendous strides towards achieving it. We will do it as we can and we consider it important. It is essential to realise that the development of such countries, especially in Africa, is in the long-term interests of our country. We are not being asked to sacrifice our self-interest for others: there is a mutual self-interest in ensuring that the problems are dealt with.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): Does the Prime Minister agree that population growth is the root cause of African poverty and indeed, of general environmental decline? Will he confirm that he will make that one of his reallocated priorities and will he continue the all-party consensus on the subject?

The Prime Minister: I shall certainly continue the all-party consensus. However, the issue of population growth must be seen in the context of how the countries are developing. The greater their prospects of serious economic development, with a proper enterprise sector in their economies and reduced corruption—because corruption is a blight both on inward investment and on any sensible allocation of aid—the better things will be. It is important to see measures related to population growth in the context of all the other things that we are doing to bring about a different way of life in those countries. However, as I said, I am happy for the cross-party consensus on the subject to continue.

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's statement, but does he agree that more should be done by our G7 partners to ensure the full implementation of the HIPC—heavily indebted poor countries—initiative by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, because that is one of the ways in which we can help to reduce debt for the poorest countries in the world?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I agree. The HIPC agreement is important, and the new Secretary of State for International Development has laid emphasis upon it. As I discovered during some of the bilateral meetings that I had with those from African countries during the United Nations meeting, some of those countries spend a vast proportion of the public money they spend simply on debt repayment, so that, of their overall expenditure, only a small percentage is left for trying to develop their countries. In the end, that is a huge inhibition on their development.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Did the summit accept the fact that it is traffic congestion

[Sir Teddy Taylor]

rather than traffic volume that causes the most air pollution problems? Will the Prime Minister make a contribution to solving such problems by removing as speedily as possible the freeze on road schemes designed to remove pollution, including those for the A13 and M25, which would make a considerable contribution to reducing air pollution?

The Prime Minister: We have moved pretty quickly from world statesmanship to constituency interests. As for the individual road schemes, the hon. Gentleman will know that a road review is now being undertaken, and I cannot tell him anything about his particular road. However, if there is something that we are about to do about it, I shall let him know. I might add that I believe that one of the most important things that we can do to reduce pollution is to encourage the use of public transport.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): In the attempt to combat international crime, has my right hon. Friend considered using the services of George Carman? As for the problem of the hole in the ozone layer, will he remember that he will not be able to solve it by market forces, nor by using a man with a bike, a ladder and an enterprise allowance? It can be solved only by intervention, planning and organisation—[HON. MEMBERS: "Socialism."]—by other nation states. That cannot be done by market forces.

The Prime Minister: If I may so to my hon. Friend, there is some truth in what he says. *[Interruption.]* Nervous looks all round. I do not know about hiring George Carman. I do not think that we can afford his fees; I shall have to speak to the Chancellor about that. In my view, the environmental problems require a mixture of solutions. Of course, there are important measures involving regulation and intervention. I agree that if we want an integrated transport strategy, it will not come about through market forces.

On the other hand, unless developing countries in Africa and elsewhere have effective market economies, with private enterprise in them, they will never make the transition to more developed economies that is essential if they are to tackle their environmental as well as their other problems. If this does not seem like too much of a balancing act, I would say that we need a mixture of the two.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): I welcome the general thrust of what has been said in the exchanges on the statement, and emphasise the point that expenditure will have to be involved in some aspects of it. Will the Prime Minister elaborate on what he meant when he said that the leaders had emphasised that there should be no "unproductive" expenditure, particularly in the military sphere? Will there be further developments in disarmament and particularly in getting rid of nuclear weapons—surely one of the white elephants of this century? Could not the money involved be better spent in other areas?

The Prime Minister: I meant that it is important that any aid that we give to countries is used for genuinely productive purposes, not for corruption or buying weapons. Much of the debt of those countries is related to their weapons burdens. One of the reasons why it is important that Russia becomes a member and creditor of the Paris Club is precisely so that some of those debt problems can be reduced.

It is important that we continue with a properly structured aid programme and we would like to increase it if possible. But the quid pro quo is that the money must go into economies that genuinely have a chance to use it constructively. There must be an insistence that proper strings are attached to make sure that money is not wasted on corrupt or unproductive investment.

Finally, aid must be provided in a way that gives those economies a long-term future, rather than shovelling money for no proper purpose. In the end, our constituents are prepared to accept that we have an international and moral responsibility, but they insist—perfectly reasonably—that if money is spent, it should be spent properly.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): Did the Prime Minister underline to the other Heads of Government the importance of ensuring the stability, peace and democratic future of Hong Kong? Will he outline some of the discussions that were held to ensure that those are guaranteed?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we have a continuing commitment to Hong Kong and, under the terms of the joint declaration, we will be involved for a significant period after the handover. We have made it clear that one of the key issues is the undertaking to hold democratic elections within 12 months of the handover. We must make sure also that we are sufficiently mobilising international opinion, so that not merely Britain but all parts of the international community are exerting pressure. The importance of the words in that communiqué was precisely that—there was a consensus in the international community that the joint declaration must be adhered to.

We want a strong and stable relationship with China—that is important to the future of the people of Hong Kong—but it must be on the basis of adherence to the terms of the joint declaration. That is the international agreement we concluded and that must be the basis for our relationship with China and Hong Kong.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): The Prime Minister said that he was looking to an integrated transport strategy on the part of the United Kingdom to achieve the British contribution towards a reduction of 15 per cent. in greenhouse gases by the European Union by 2010. Can we therefore expect that, in perhaps the most congested and polluted part of the United Kingdom in terms of road transport—Greater London and the south-east of England—the Government will be investing money in improving public transport and, in particular, in London Underground, which is grievously in need of investment to which Labour committed itself during the election campaign?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will know that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will make proposals in respect of London Underground in due

course. Pollution in London is a big problem and that is precisely why the integrated transport strategy is the right one. Next spring, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will publish a White Paper on integrated transport as a whole. I look forward to its receiving the hon. Member's support and that of other Conservative Members, because that will be extremely important if we have any chance of meeting the EU target.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): I congratulate the Prime Minister on his success at the summit. What progress was made on the UN funding crisis and, in particular, on the refusal of the United States to pay its contribution to the UN?

The Prime Minister: Without exaggerating to my hon. Friend, I think that I can say that some progress is being made. President Clinton is personally committed to resolving the funding crisis and it has helped enormously that the new Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, has made such a good and promising start in the reforms that he is making to the United Nations secretariat and the way in which it works. There is a general consensus that if those reforms receive the requisite degree of support and genuinely go deep and strong and make the necessary changes, the funding crisis should be resolved. We certainly want it to be resolved. It is very much in our interests that it is.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Since I took silk a minute or so, I think, before the Prime Minister's wife, may I suggest that he takes my advice on the employment of QCs rather than that of the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner)? I congratulate him on his kind remarks about his predecessor and his Government over the Rio targets. It was gracious of him to acknowledge that. As I think that he represents a partly rural constituency, as I do, will he ensure that nothing that the Government do in seeking to achieve environmental targets damages the rural economy or the ability of our farmers and other rural residents to make a living and thrive in the modern economy?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for his kind words about my remarks. I believe that achieving those environmental targets will not damage the rural economy at all. Indeed, properly done, they should help it, since farmers and those living in rural communities would perhaps benefit as much as anyone from a better transport system and, of course, people in rural communities will particularly benefit from greater energy efficiency.

The only way that we will make this argument on the environment work is when people cease to believe that it requires some sort of sacrifice of their interests and recognise that it is in everyone's collective interest that we make the changes to the environment that are plainly and obviously necessary.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): Did the G8 discuss during the session on international crime ways and measures to prevent child pornography?

The Prime Minister: We did not discuss that specifically and I do not believe that it was specifically referred to in the communiqué, although the subject was raised at the European Union summit in Amsterdam, where suggestions were made as to how we can co-operate on such issues. It is important that we do so. In general terms, there was a reference in the communiqué to different types of organised crime. On paedophiles, one of the most worrying aspects is that there is some evidence that that crime is happening on an organised basis across national boundaries. Perhaps that is something which we can study in the run-up to the Birmingham summit next year.

Sir David Madel (South–West Bedfordshire): What the Prime Minister said on green issues at Denver will considerably affect the car industry and employment unless those matters are handled carefully. I remind the Prime Minister of the extreme anxiety on the Benches behind him when Ford threatened the production of the Escort at Halewood. The thing to do is to change the tax system so that car manufacturers are encouraged to produce more fuel-efficient and pollution-free engines. That is the way to guarantee jobs and satisfy environmentalists.

The Prime Minister: I agree that incentives have a role to play, although I cannot comment on any particular taxation proposals. Most people accept that it will be a matter of choice whether people use their cars. We should try to give them a better choice than they have at present. There are plenty of people who, in certain instances, would use public transport if it were there and available to them. The evidence from abroad as well as here, in certain instances, is clear.

I agree that this has to be done in co-operation with the car industry. That is absolutely essential. The hon. Gentleman will remember that when the debates about catalytic converters and unleaded petrol were taking place, the car industry came on side after a time to help develop those initiatives and they were successful. I commend to him the speech on the environment and business made by John Browne, the head of British Petroleum, a few weeks ago. He will see from that that many people in business see environmental measures as having a positive effect on business, not a negative one.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): I welcome the acknowledgement that limitation of arms and military expenditure in sub-Saharan Africa is extremely important. Were there any specific proposals to achieve it?

The Prime Minister: The initiative is one which I announced in relation to our own programmes. As the money is allocated, my hon. Friend will be able to see the conditions on which the aid is given. We are anxious to ensure that the money is spent on education, health care and sanitation; it is important that we ensure that no aid is being siphoned off into what is effectively military expenditure. He will see that developing. On the multilateral side, we intend to carry on working with other countries to get those principles accepted by them, too.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Does the Prime Minister agree that it is vital that we seek

[Mr. Graham Brady]

to move freight from roads to railways? Will he join me in congratulating the privatised rail industry on the measures that it has taken to encourage that process?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to congratulate anyone who contributes to solving the problem. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions is in touch with the rail operators at the moment, to consider how they can help to make the system more integrated. One of the worries that people always had about privatisation was that it would break up and fragment a unified system. It may be possible within the existing system to try to mitigate some of those problems. That is precisely what we want to work on. If the rail operators help us to achieve that, I shall be the first to congratulate them.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the stand that he took on the environment. I am sure that at Denver he spoke of the link between solving the problems of the environment and jobs and employability. Will he ensure that we in this country start to make that link? I am sure that he has seen the dispiriting league table showing that the investment record of the private sector over the past year was down yet again under the previous Government. If we are to tackle the environment and make jobs out of tackling it, we must lead in research. I hope that my right hon. Friend will lead a crusade on that.

The Prime Minister: I can certainly assure my hon. Friend that we will make the link between jobs and employability and the environment, as we recognise that it is important to do so. Recent estimates by independent international organisations suggest that environmental technology could be one of the growth areas in employment over the next few decades.

It is tremendously important that we also recognise that those companies with the most advanced technology, capable of producing greater energy efficiency, are among the most successful anywhere in the world. Companies find that if, for example, they introduce proper measures for waste recycling, and engage properly with energy efficiency, they not only contribute to the overall impact on the environment of business but reduce their costs. It is extremely important to make the connection, and we will certainly do so.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I welcome the Prime Minister's frankness in acknowledging that the previous Government's policies, such as the energy efficiency best practice programme and the home energy efficiency scheme, enabled this country to be one of the minority of developed nations that met and surpassed their targets on greenhouse gases. Does he favour a switch to coal-fired power stations?

The Prime Minister: On the latter point—as the hon. Gentleman knows, because we agreed with it when it was the previous Government's policy—I favour a balanced energy policy. We have been perfectly happy all the way through to agree on the energy efficiency measures that were introduced under the previous Government and which we will develop. Indeed, the environmental task force will be a development of existing policies.

In respect of renewable energy, we are encouraging the greater use of solar energy and wind power, particularly through the non-fossil fuel obligation, which encourages power suppliers to make use of renewable energy sources. We will introduce a Bill to ensure that the levy continues, as it would otherwise expire next year. I am perfectly happy to accept that good work was done before; it was done with the Labour party's consent and we look forward to developing it further. If that can be done on the basis of political agreement, so much the better.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I welcome everything that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said about the conditions for giving overseas aid, but is it not vital that we recognise that developing nations have so much poverty, on scales that we can hardly envisage, to eliminate that they sometimes find that the less environmentally advantageous way is the easy way? It is essential that overseas aid and the environment are linked, because environmental problems never recognise national boundaries.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. That is one reason why it is important that, when we increase our aid to sub-Saharan Africa, we do so on the basis of programmes that will be environmentally beneficial as well as assisting the development of those countries. During the UN special session, we also announced measures that will assist forestry. There is a range of issues where we can link aid and the development assistance that we are giving to measures that will improve the environment. That should be read in conjunction with the measures to reduce the level of debt. For many of those countries, the level of debt is the single biggest problem that they face.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On greenhouse gas reductions, the right hon. Gentleman knows that much of Europe, and certainly his party, was wedded to carbon taxes. Was that raised at the Denver summit or later at the environment summit? How did the Prime Minister persuade people that his Government were keen on reducing greenhouse gases when it is their policy to reduce the cost of domestic fuels by taking money off VAT?

The Prime Minister: We have no proposals to introduce carbon taxes and that was not discussed at Denver. We believe that the measures that we have outlined will give us the very best chance of meeting the targets that we have set ourselves. The single best thing that we can do in relation to that is to improve energy efficiency. VAT on fuel harmed a lot of people, particularly those living in poverty, who faced rising fuel bills and sometimes, in the case of old age pensioners, a choice between heating and eating in winter. That is not acceptable.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): My right hon. Friend made passing reference to international fisheries management. Has Japan made any promise to impose tougher restraints on its tuna fishing fleet? May I remind him that that fleet has imposed severe economic damage on numerous coastal or littoral nations in the third world and that its vessels are beginning to appear in the north Atlantic?

The Prime Minister: I am not aware of any particular moves by the Japanese on international fisheries

management. Perhaps I could write to my hon. Friend on the tuna fishing fleet, because I am afraid that I cannot give an answer off the top of my head.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): I understand that there will be a further statement this week on earth summit 2, but, meanwhile, could the Prime Minister tell us more about the evolving American position on greenhouse gas emissions? America is responsible for 25 per cent. of global CO_2 emissions. Is it likely that the United States will agree to significant reductions in Kyoto in December? Does he agree that environmental sustainability must become a major foreign policy issue and that countries that refuse to take it seriously should be regarded as a threat to global security?

The Prime Minister: I agree that it is important that we co-operate with other countries in safeguarding the environment, which is why we have taken the action that we have. In respect of the United States, there was some progress at Denver because all the countries committed themselves to binding targets for the reduction of greenhouse gases by 2010. That is a step forward. I think that the critical time will be between now and the Kyoto conference, when I very much hope that the United States will be able to do that. I think that both the President and the Vice-President are personally sympathetic, but obviously big interests are involved, and the United States has particular problems. I am hopeful of making progress.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): Everyone commends the Prime Minister and the G7 leaders for their initiative on sub-Saharan Africa. Did they discuss indebtedness and poverty in Asia and in central and south America, where, for example, Nicaragua had, when I last read about it, the single largest debt per head of population of any country in the world? That is linked to the growth and distribution of addictive drugs such as cocaine and heroin. Was there discussion of whether policing was not enough and whether programmes were needed to lift such countries out of poverty and their dependence on growing addictive drugs?

The Prime Minister: There certainly was discussion of the debt problems of countries not only in Africa but in South America and elsewhere. There is a recognition that the problem is not by any means limited to Africa. There are programmes in place that encourage development of the economies of indebted countries and reduce their dependence on the production of drugs. Part of the discussion this week in New York at the UN special session will be on how to intensify those programmes and make them more effective.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): While I am sure that the Prime Minister is right to be critical of those industrial countries that have done little or nothing on CO_2 emissions, does he agree that it is vital that we press ahead and do the most that we can for both our own environment and the global environment? Will he make it clear that there is no truth in the interpretation that has been put on the comments of some Ministers that Britain will stick to the new Government's 20 per cent. target for cuts in CO_2 emissions only if other countries co-operate in cutting their emissions? Will he confirm that our target is not conditional on the action of others?

The Prime Minister: It is not a conditional target, but the truth is that it is much easier for us to meet it if other countries are moving in the same direction. That is in a sense a statement of the obvious.

I believe that there is a general will in the European Union to make progress. It is possible that by Kyoto we will get a better deal than anything that is on the table now. Under the measures that we are taking now, we will achieve a 10 per cent. reduction by the year 2000 of 1990 levels. That is well in line with what we can then do to achieve our target. It is possible to do this by taking measures that are sensible in any event, but it is obviously easier if other countries are also taking such measures.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): With regard to the Prime Minister's welcome remarks on employment, how soon does he think that we can see more long-term unemployed, and the army of unskilled unemployed, placed in meaningful employment? My right hon. Friend will know that that is a matter of urgent interest in Wales, for example.

The Prime Minister: I hope very much that we can make a start on that as soon as we have provisions in our programme, such as the windfall tax, in place. There was a strong recognition among all countries that structural unemployment—people are sometimes unemployed through generations—is a problem which we all have a responsibility to tackle in our countries. Many of the problems relating to crime and social disorder stem from structural unemployment.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Britain has a good record on reducing carbon dioxide emissions, but does my right hon. Friend acknowledge that much of it is due to low economic growth in the early 1990s and, more especially, the dash for gas in the past few years? I agree with the 20 per cent. target by 2010, but it is set against 2.25 per cent. per year economic growth, which is a compound 50 per cent. increase in living standards. To use 20 per cent. less energy will entail a 50 per cent. increase in energy efficiency. We are setting ourselves demanding targets, which may mean hard choices.

The Prime Minister: It can be said that the progress that we have made is in some part governed by the low levels of economic activity in the years immediately following 1990, but we are on course to meet the target in 2000—10 per cent., at least half of the total—with projections of growth of more than 2 per cent. per year. I believe that it is well possible to do it. Yes, it will require a real seriousness of intent, but we have only scratched the surface of the possibilities of energy efficiency. There is an awful lot more that can be done and which we will do.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): In relation to the money agreed for restoring the sarcophagus at Chernobyl, was there specific agreement on a time scale for that to be done? As we know that in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union there are other nuclear power

[Mr. Neil Gerrard]

stations that have the same sort of outdated technology and pose the same potential dangers as Chernobyl, what discussion was there on what could be done to prevent another Chernobyl in the future?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. A significant part of our discussion was devoted not only to the problems of the remaining reactors at Chernobyl, but to other outdated nuclear reactors. Of the money that has been pledged, the European Union's share will come principally from the TACIS programme—technical assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States—but there will be a small bilateral contribution from Britain spread over a number of years. That is absolutely essential if we are to reach the target date of closing Chernobyl by 2000.

There is a great sense of concern that it is important that we move ahead in this matter, and the memorandum of understanding that we reached with Ukraine will be tremendously important in that respect. We will make progress, but I have to say that it was one of the most concerning aspects of our discussions, because there is still an awful lot that needs to be done.

Orders of the Day

Plant Varieties Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

4.35 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The basic purpose of the Bill is to implement the 1991 revisions to the international convention for the protection of new varieties of plants, or the UPOV convention as it is commonly known—UPOV is a French acronym, which I shall not seek to translate for the House. At the same time, the Bill will align the standards of protection offered by United Kingdom national systems of plant breeders' rights with those already available under the parallel, but quite separate, European Community plant breeders' rights regime, which was established in September 1994. The UK will therefore be able to ratify the international convention.

Plant breeders' rights are a form of intellectual property—similar in many ways to patents—which enable plant breeders to obtain protection for their new varieties and an income, through royalties, from their commercial exploitation. A vibrant and successful plant breeding industry, committed to investment in developing new, improved varieties, is vital to the success of UK agriculture and of the nursery trade. A robust system of plant variety protection is essential to provide the necessary incentives to investment in plant breeding.

In many ways, I would describe the Bill as a one-nation Bill, where old Labour—*[Laughter.]* I shall say that again: this is a one-nation Bill, where old Tory meets new Labour.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Did the Minister write his own speech?

Mr. Rooker: Yes, I did write this bit.

The Bill implements a 1991 international agreement of the previous Government. Consultation was conducted in November 1994 and a draft Bill was published in February this year. As 80 per cent. of the Bill re-enacts existing legislation, I do not propose to treat the House to a detailed speech on Second Reading as though this was a brand new subject, fresh to the House. I will, of course, touch on the main changes from existing legislation, because it is important to do so for proper scrutiny. Subject to the will of the House, we will take other stages today and I am willing to answer detailed questions about specific aspects in Committee, given that there are several amendments to be discussed.

Plant breeding is an international system which, for more than 30 years, has been underpinned at international level by the UPOV convention. The UK played a major role in the development of the first UPOV convention, which was signed in 1961, and was a founder member of the union established by the convention. The union remains the main international forum for discussion,

co-operation and agreement on plant variety protection; the UK played a leading role in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Has my hon. Friend any idea who will represent the United Kingdom in future?

Mr. Rooker: My hon. Friend is predictable. Earlier this morning, because the matter was not covered in the briefings, I asked my officials about the devolution aspects of the Bill. On the basis that the controller of plant variety rights represents the United Kingdom, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food covers the budget.

To the best of my knowledge, and subject to discussion on other legislation, the controller will continue to represent the United Kingdom. This may or may not be a devolved matter, but it seems inconceivable that it would be in future. Basically, this is a United Kingdom issue. The United Kingdom is a member of UPOV and will continue to be. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point, because I had raised it in any event and we need clarity; needless to say, it will come in future legislation.

Technology has moved on since 1964 and it was the driving force behind the revisions in 1991. Israel, Denmark and the Netherlands have already ratified the 1991 revisions. When the Bill receives Royal Assent and once we have ratified the convention, we shall be the third member of the European Union to ratify it. It is worth taking a lead in Europe and setting an example. Against that background, it is essential to provide UK plant breeders with the additional protection of the 1991 convention, to provide a secure basis for future investment in breeding in this country.

It is highly desirable that we bring our national system of protection in line with that of the Community regime, which is already based on the 1991 convention. Plant breeders have a choice between national systems of protection and the Community system, which offers a right that is valid in all 15 member states. The Community regime is, however, more expensive than the national systems. A breeder who intends to commercialise his variety in one or two EU countries will find it more economic, therefore, to opt for national protection, provided the protection is as good as that offered by the Community regime. That is an important aspect of the Bill.

If the national regime is aligned with the Community regime, plant breeders will be able to obtain the same standards of protection more cheaply if they intend to confine commercialisation of a variety to the UK or perhaps to one or two other EU countries. However, it will also put an end to the confusion that can arise when two systems that are different, but have the same users—plant breeders, farmers and seed processors—operate side by side.

In broad terms, the main changes in the Bill compared to the Plant Varieties and Seeds Act 1964 are, first, that the possibility of protection is extended to all genera and species; secondly, that the rules on prior exploitation in advance of an application for rights are relaxed to allow breeders, if they so wish and are prepared to take the risk, to test the market in the UK for their varieties before seeking protection; thirdly, that a simplified system of provisional protection pending a grant of rights is introduced; and, fourthly, that the breeder's right is strengthened and extended in several areas.

We are also taking the opportunity to extend the period during which proceedings may be taken for contravention of seed regulations from six to 12 months in Great Britain. That mainly affects what I might call, in my language, the seed potato scams in Scotland. That provision is contained in clause 44.

When one compares the Bill to the 1964 Act, one finds that perhaps the most fundamental changes are in clause 6 and 7; I shall concentrate on those and on references to clause 9.

Clauses 6 and 7 set out the scope of plant breeders' rights. The basic right in the 1964 Act is the exclusive right to sell propagating material of a protected variety or produce propagating material for sale. The Bill changes the nature of the breeder's right from the right to do to the right to prevent others from doing certain things with propagating material of a protected variety. This brings plant breeders' rights closer to patent rights, but the change in itself is, and will be, thought to have little practical effect.

Clause 6 sets out the extent of the breeder's rights in a protected variety. The key change is the much wider scope of things that the breeder can prevent others from doing without his authority, including, for example, any production or reproduction of propagating material, conditioning—by which I mean preparing for planting—import, export and so on. Taken together, provisions in clause 6 give the breeder control of all the things necessary to exploit a variety. That includes the use of farm-saved seed, which I shall come to when I discuss clause 9.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Does it also include the breeder's right to constrain the use by others, in varieties that have already been developed, of genetic manipulation, and the apportionment of the rights in those cases? I raise that point now for later consideration.

Mr. Rooker: I do not want to repeat myself, but I guarantee that I shall refer to that later—if not on Second Reading, in Committee.

In normal circumstances, the breeder's right is exhausted once propagating material is disposed of with his consent to produce a commercial crop. For example, he cannot exercise control of wheat seed sold to produce a crop of milling wheat and used for that purpose. In other words, the breeder has no control of the production or use of consumption crops.

However, the ability of the breeder to take action against infringement of his rights has been strengthened by extending his rights to harvested material that has been obtained from the unauthorised use of propagating material, in circumstances where the breeder has not had a reasonable opportunity to exercise rights against the material before it is harvested.

The Bill includes an optional provision from the 1991 convention that allows Ministers to extend rights, by regulation, to specific products made directly from harvested material of particular types of varieties that have been obtained through unauthorised use of propagating and harvested material, where the breeder has not had a reasonable opportunity to exercise his rights at an earlier stage. That is a crucial part of the changes.

[Mr. Rooker]

The extension of rights to enable the breeder to act against harvested material and, where provided for in regulations, directly made products, is known as the "cascade" principle. I emphasise that it does not give plant breeders a choice between acting against propagating or consumption material. The breeder must always act against infringement of his rights at the earliest possible stage. He must, therefore, act against unauthorised use of propagating material right up to the point of harvest, if he can reasonably do so. If he knows of an infringement of his rights before harvest of the infringing material, he must act at that point—he cannot decide to wait until after harvest and act against the consumption crop.

The most obvious instance where a breeder might not have the opportunity to exercise rights at an earlier stage is unauthorised use of propagating material outside the United Kingdom, in a country that does not offer protection to it, followed by the import of harvested material or, possibly, of a product made directly from the harvested material. An example would be the import of cut flowers that have been created from that earlier material. The breeder would have no opportunity to act because the flowers would be created outside the UK and the breeder would not know about it beforehand, but the import of the product of that seed is the point at which he can take action.

Clause 7 implements the extension of the breeder's right in a protected variety to encompass a second variety dependent on it, which is a new provision in the 1991 convention.

There are two types of dependency. The first, which is already recognised in the 1964 Act, occurs when a dependent variety can be obtained only as a result of repeated use of a protected variety. The most common example is that of hybrid varieties that can be obtained only by returning constantly to the parent line. In practical terms, that shift of emphasis is unlikely to have a substantial effect on the current use and production of hybrids, especially as parent lines and dependent hybrids are commonly "owned" by the same plant breeder.

The second type of dependency recognised in the Bill—essential derivation—represents a more fundamental change, introduced to address developments in plant breeding technology. Protected varieties may freely be used in plant breeding programmes. The free use of germplasm to develop new varieties is, and has always been, a fundamental principle of UPOV. However, where the resultant change is very small—typically, one characteristic—but sufficient to make the second variety distinct from the initial variety, and in all other respects the second variety expresses the same characteristics as the initial variety, it may be essentially derived from the initial variety. In other words, there is no cop-out. The plant breeder's rights are protected.

Clause 7 extends the umbrella of protection in the initial variety to cover the essentially derived variety. It is possible, with modern technology, for people to try to find ways around these protections; but tracing back to the original variety is also now possible. It is important to protect the intellectual rights of the breeder—hence this important part of the Bill.

The consequence of this change is that the breeder of the initial variety has the right to prevent anyone from doing any of the acts in clause 6 in respect of the essentially derived variety—in other words, he can prevent its commercial exploitation. The essentially derived variety may or may not be protected in its own right. If it is protected by a different person from the one with the initial variety, then the authorisation of both is required to enable it to be exploited. If it is not protected, authorisation is required only from the holder of rights in the initial variety.

This enables the breeder of a protected variety to obtain a fair return on his investment. Such investments are made over many years and yield an uncertain return. In practical terms, those working on a breeding programme that may result in an essentially derived variety can be expected to reach agreement on its commercialisation with the owner of the initial variety—otherwise, there would be little point in their work. This is not a matter on which the Government should take a stand; it is a matter for commercial negotiation between the people concerned, and they have the right to insist on such negotiations.

The 1991 convention also allows contracting states to restrict the breeder's right in respect of farm-saved seed, subject to safeguarding the legitimate interests of the breeder. Income from royalties is essential to encourage investment in UK plant breeding. Use of farm-saved seed without payment of royalty denies breeders income from their investment and restricts their ability to invest further in development.

Although the Bill exempts the use of farm-saved seed of the main agricultural crops from the breeder's right, it nevertheless balances this with a requirement on farmers to make payment to breeders when seed is farm saved. For non-experts like me, that means farmers taking the seed from a crop, saving it, and replanting it. Personally, I had never heard of farm-saved seed until recently—but it is an important element here. Several million pounds of investment are at stake.

Mr. Dalyell: I can sympathise with my hon. Friend. None of us is an expert in this area—it would take a professor of plant breeding studies to master it.

The briefing notes to clause 9 state that the 1991 convention

"does not allow contracting parties to restrict the breeder's right in respect of varieties whose production requires the repeated use of protected variety".

I understand that there is some difficulty at law in defining the repeated use of protected variety. I do not expect the Minister to answer off the top of his head, but if he has access to legal advice, perhaps he can return to the subject later.

Mr. Rooker: I shall deal with my hon. Friend's point on clause stand part.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Does the hon. Gentleman know that some people believe strongly that the Bill should be amended to make clause 9(6) apply only to varieties produced since 1 January 1992? Has the Minister received any representations about that; and what does he propose to do about it?

Mr. Rooker: The answer is yes. I shall come to the point later on, and we can discuss it in greater detail in the clause stand part debate.

A similar provision permitting farmers to use farm-saved seed without the breeder's prior permission is in the Community regime, and UK plant breeders have been collecting payment for the use of farm-saved seed of Community-protected varieties since last autumn.

Farmers will therefore be able to farm saved seed of varieties of these species for use on their own holdings without the breeder's authority. Unless they come into one of the exempt categories, though, they will be required to pay the breeder equitable remuneration which is sensibly lower than the royalty charged on certified seed of the same variety in the same area. Those points are clarified further in the legislation.

It is for breeders and farmers to negotiate what to charge for the use of farm-saved seed, taking account of the requirement that the charge must be sensibly lower than the royalty on certified seed. The Bill gives guidance on what is meant by sensibly lower by reference to the Community regime. But it does not put any figure on it, and the Government do not intend to intervene in what we believe are essentially commercial matters between breeders and farmers.

The requirement to pay for the use of farm-saved seed will apply to varieties protected under the 1964 Act, as well as new varieties that come into protection after the Bill comes into force.

Some farmers are exempt from the requirement to pay. There is a permanent exemption for small farmers as defined in the Community regime; it is referred to in the arable areas payments scheme. Furthermore, farmers who have saved seed of a particular variety before the Act comes into force may also continue to do so, free of charge, until Ministers discontinue this prior-use exemption by order. A similar prior-use exemption is in the Community regime. This expires on 30 June 2001, though the Council regulation makes it clear that that date is subject to review in the light of a report that the Commission is required to make before then, and may be extended on a variety, group or species basis, depending on the findings in the report.

We intend to discontinue the prior-use exemption at the same time as the corresponding provision in the Community regime is discontinued. I assure the House that that will not be before 30 June 2001, which means that the majority of farmers who have saved seed of older UK-protected varieties before this Bill comes into force may continue to do so free of charge until 30 June 2001 at least.

I have been impressed over the past couple of weeks to read about the approach that the breeders, farmers and seed processors adopted to the farm-saved seed issue when it was first broached for Community-protected varieties. I also commend the former Government: the legislation was their draft Bill. For years we pushed for it, when in opposition. We all gladly embrace the idea of draft Bills—as far as humanly possible, legislation should be presented, following White and Green Papers, in draft form to those outside. The approach to the Bill has been constructive throughout.

Clause 10 makes it clear that the breeder's right is exhausted once propagating material is disposed of by him or with his authority.

The rest of the Bill relates to general issues: the maintenance and naming of varieties, offences, compulsory licences, appeals to the Plant Varieties and Seeds Tribunal, the work of the controller, and so on. Details are set out in the schedules. The Bill is technically complex, and its importance is not to be measured by the number of its clauses—any more than the importance of some Community legislation can be gauged from its length. About 80 per cent. of the Bill's contents are simply existing legislation, re-enacted and simplified, and designed to meet the UK's obligations under international conventions. I commend it to the House.

4.58 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): The Minister rightly said that he is the Bill's godfather; it was a foundling in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he arrived there. I do not know whether he discovered it with great enthusiasm, but it is an important addition to British legislation which aligns us with international law and we do not intend to oppose it.

I suppose that I should declare an interest as a keen vegetable gardener. Whether saving a few examples of broad bean seed from one year to the next constitutes a punishable or taxable offence, I am not clear.

I realise that this subject may not be wholly redolent of the romance and mystery that affect some parts of MAFF. Some of the Minister's sentences resembled the chunks of prose that are dropped on the desks of unsuspecting third formers at Ripon grammar school with the instruction, "Punctuate." The Secretary of State for Education and Employment will no doubt incorporate such chunks into the national curriculum to teach children to read and write in the future.

Mr. Rooker: I simplified it.

Mr. Curry: If the Minister simplified his speech, one can only imagine what it was like before. I shall not take him up on his admission, but this could be described as a hybrid Bill. The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) might become too agitated in his seat if he feels that we are breaching constitutional practice as well.

Mr. Dalyell: Such a thought had not occurred to me.

Mr. Curry: We support the principles of the Bill, which implements in UK law the international agreement on plant breeders' intellectual property. I shall therefore limit my remarks to exploring a particular area. The Minister covered it to a degree and will no doubt complete his clarification in the course of today's proceedings. It concerns farm-saved seed. In March last year, the National Farmers Union reached agreement with plant breeders on payment and terms and conditions, the key element of which was that, where a variety was used before the agreement, farmers were free to continue using it without payment. Our main concern is that the Bill should respect the agreement and not impede it or cast doubt on it.

Why does clause 9 empower Ministers to change the agreement by order? Under European Union legislation, no changes were envisaged in the royalty system until 2001, by which time the Commission may have formed a view. The UK legislation makes no reference to that date, although just before the Minister sat down he said with some precision that he would not act to bring that

[Mr. Curry]

agreement to an end until at least 2001. He has therefore given us the assurance that we sought, although I am not clear why the phraseology appeared in the Bill. Perhaps a civil servant was looking for an emergency fire escape in the event of a conflagration.

Mr. Rooker: No date appears in the Bill so that the date can be extended, not shortened. That is why I said at least 2001.

Mr. Curry: I am grateful to the Minister for that important clarification, which will be generally welcomed.

The second issue relates to clause 6, which empowers Ministers to prescribe by regulation additional factors to be taken into account. Will the Minister outline what he envisages in that respect when we discuss those clauses? We have tabled amendments that are designed to encourage him to explore that matter.

We need clarification of clause 6(2). I am familiar with the legislative use of the concept of "reasonableness". Indeed, braver men have spent much time in Committee trying to define its meaning. It would be useful to have clarification of the Government's intention in that regard.

We support the Bill and I do not intend to blather when there is no need to do so. I accept that all Ministers have speeches like that to deliver from time to time and I look forward to the clarifications that we seek. We shall not divide the House on this matter.

5.3 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): May I place on record our slight concern that this important Bill is being rushed through, with all its stages being taken in one day? Our concern is shared by the National Farmers Union, which has made representations to me on that point. I know that the Government have a heavy legislative programme and want to get a lot done this Session, but the Bill should not be dealt with by a Committee of the House in one day. Neither is it as uncontroversial as the Minister implies. I accept that much of it re-enacts the 1964 Act, but things have moved on since then, with the advent of biotechnology. The Bill should reflect that change.

Perhaps when the new Government took office their civil servants whipped out this Bill saying, "Here is one that we prepared earlier," and assured Ministers that it was both uncontroversial and urgent. They probably said that it fulfilled our European obligations, would be no problem whatever, had been subject to consultation and needed an early slot in the parliamentary timetable. I understand that the Minister and his Department have been busy finding their feet. They have had to deal with the mess of BSE and proposals for the food standards agency, and have been busy with other matters, so I understand if the points that I shall make have not been considered by them.

I accept that, in many ways, the Bill is modest. Our concern does not necessarily lie with the Bill; the fact that it is the continuation of a process worries Liberal Democrats. I hope that Ministers will not feel obliged to defend every full stop and comma of the Bill but will be open to argument. I was pleased that the Minister responded to the point made by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) a moment ago, as it was one which I intended to make.

The Bill has profound implications for the future of food production and the relationship between farmers and plant breeders. The Minister made much of the rights of breeders, but I heard little about the rights of farmers, which are of concern to Liberal Democrats. We have tabled a number of amendments following consultation with the National Farmers Union, the Soil Association, Greenpeace and others, and I hope that the Minister will respond positively. I hope that he might even be prepared to accept some of our amendments in a spirit of co-operation, or at least give an undertaking that the points that we raise today will be considered seriously once the Bill reaches the House of Lords.

As the Minister said, the Bill amends the Plant Varieties and Seeds Act 1964 and incorporates points from the international convention for the protection of new varieties of plants—UPOV 1991. The House in entitled to ask the wider question, whether the convention is in the public interest and the interests of farmers and consumers, as well as the narrower question of how its articles will be applied in the Bill. We have concerns about both. On the wider issue, few matters are more basic to society than the provision of a ready supply of wholesome food. Poor food supplies led to the creation of the common agricultural policy, and we are willing to spend millions of pounds each year in our determination never to run short of food again.

There has been much talk in the House and elsewhere about the need for Britain to retain its sovereignty. I take the word sovereignty to mean our ability to determine our own destiny and to have in place arrangements that prevent our being beholden, against our wishes, to external powers in whatever form. None the less, we are now faced with the problem that, within 10 years, five American biotechnology companies may control some 80 per cent. of our staples. Monsanto, the American giant, has predicted that, within a decade, genetically modified crops will be the norm in 80 per cent. of temperate regions. I prefer to say modified to engineered because engineering is a precise art and that is not what those companies indulge in.

The change represents a massive transfer of power away from British farmers and consumers to unaccountable transnational companies. Monsanto, the chemical company, has been active in getting a big stake in the seed business. Its boss, Robert Shapiro, is quoted in *The Economist* of 26 April 1997 as saying that he wants Monsanto to be the main provider of "agricultural biotechnology". By August 1995, his company was the world leader—I do not use the term in a flattering way—in securing biotech plant patents. On one estimate, again quoted in *The Economist* of 26 April 1997, the world market for genetically altered seeds will reach $7 billion by 2005, compared with only $450 million in 1995. It is interesting to note that Monsanto's share price rose from $14 at the beginning of 1995 to $39 by April 1997.

The seed business is big business, particularly for chemical companies which are increasingly buying up seed companies. This year alone, Monsanto has bought three seed breeding and marketing companies for more than £1 billion, and Rhone-Poulenc has merged with Merck MSDA to become the world's largest poultry, genetics and animal health business.

The Bill acts in some ways as a catalyst and facilitator for transnational companies such as Monsanto to exert unprecedented control over our agriculture. I do not believe that hon. Members on either side of the House want that.

I refer hon. Members to an excellent publication called "Future of our seeds" by Vandana Shiva, which lists on page 4 the way in which seed companies and chemical companies have converged. It also lists on page 17 the top 14 owners of biotechnology plant patents: 12 out of 14 are American, with only ICI Zeneca from this country getting a look-in. Monsanto comes top with 18 separate patents, as of August 1995. The author concludes:

"Transnational companies will decide what is grown by farmers, what they use as inputs, and when they sell their produce, to whom and at what price."

If that is even partly true, it should be a matter of concern to hon. Members. If they doubt the truth of that, let us ask why transnational companies are spending billions of pounds investing in seed companies and why the stock market is responding by increasing their share value dramatically.

One of the main reasons for such investment is to produce genetically modified seed that is tied into the use of pesticides, so that farmers are obliged to buy those companies' products. Some pesticide patents—I am thinking of Roundup—are due to end shortly. How convenient it is for those companies to be able to patent seeds that are dependent on those pesticides, and so to give them a new lease of life.

Apart from concern about the transfer of power to unaccountable transnational companies, there are grave concerns about the environmental consequences of the fast move towards genetically modified crops. I note that in the preamble to the Bill, on page v, under the heading "Environmental impact", the words "There is none" appear. Had I been sitting on a chair at the time, I would have fallen off when I read that. That statement is incredible.

The Bill will lead inevitably to the production by transnational companies of seed varieties that may superficially bring benefits, but which could produce substantial long-term environmental problems. A comparison with nuclear power comes to mind. That was going to be clean and too cheap to meter—the best thing since sliced bread. It has turned out to be expensive and a proven danger to people and the environment on the occasions when the roulette wheel stops in the wrong place. I believe that that is a fair comparison to make with genetically modified crops.

I shall try to give the House some feel for the environmental dangers. First, there is the creation of a permanent reliance on pesticides, which at present are optional. Early this week, I asked the Minister of State what plans he had to encourage organic farming, and I was given a positive response by the Government that they are committed to that sector, as I am sure they are. However, the Bill helps to pull the rug from underneath the sector, not only by building in a reliance on pesticides, but by raising doubts that any farmer in the future will be able to guarantee that his crops are organic, when there is the possibility of migration in the air of material from a genetically modified crop in a neighbouring field, which might latch on to a similar crop nearby.

Secondly, there is the prospect that a modified crop might become a devastating weed, either by invading the countryside or by hybridising with another species to form such a weed. Many of the traits that crop geneticists seek to engineer into their crops may increase the likelihood that they will survive as weeds. One need only think of animal species that were introduced into our country and which have changed the balance of the countryside significantly, such as the rabbit, the grey squirrel and the mink. Do we want to take huge gambles with new and unpredictable crop varieties which, once released into the environment, cannot be recalled?

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the trebling of yields—for example, of cereal crops—since the last war is at least 50 per cent. the result of the work of breeders? Is that not worth the efforts that he is decrying and disparaging? It is in the farmers' interests, as well as the breeders'.

Mr. Baker: I acknowledge that breeders have rights, and we seek not to take away those rights, but to modify them so that there is a balance between the right of the breeder and that of the farmer.

Mr. Boswell: Following the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), does the hon. Gentleman accept that stringent safeguards on the release of genetic material to the environment are already in place and that those are designed to meet—and in my view substantially do meet—exactly the fears that he has expressed? Material is not loosely let out into the environment without proper consideration of the possible dangers, including any long-run dangers from genetic escape.

Mr. Baker: I do not accept that. I remember being a researcher in this place when the Environmental Protection Act 1990 was produced, and I know how little coverage was given to clauses relating to genetically engineered material. I am also aware that there is controversy over imported maize and the inability to separate maize that is genetically engineered from that which is not. I am not happy with that, and I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's point.

My third environmental concern is that there is a danger of increased pesticide residues in our food. Crops can be drenched with pesticides—perhaps they even need to be drenched with pesticides to grow under the genetically engineered arrangement. That increases the prospect of residues remaining on the finished product.

Fourthly, there is the danger of increased resistance in target insects on crops. At present, pesticides are applied in bursts, whereas an insect-killing gene in the plant will destroy susceptible insects daily. Constant exposure could lead insects to evolve resistance even more quickly than they already do.

Fifthly, there is the question of marker genes, which are attached to what might be called the genetic payload to be inserted to find out how quickly it has arrived at its destination. One popular type of marker, as the Minister will know, is the gene that makes plants resistant to antibiotics. Instead of waiting for the plants to grow, researchers can simply test them with the antibiotic. The direct concern is that genes conferring resistance to antibiotics might find their way into bacteria when the crops decay in the ground or in the stomach of animals. That must encourage a build-up in resistance to antibiotics, which is already a significant problem.

[Mr. Baker]

Sixthly, there is the possibility of unwanted reactions in health terms from eating genetically altered material. Already there has been the case of one type of soya bean that has had to be abandoned because the inclusion of a gene from the Brazil nut generated in some people the same allergic reaction as comes from eating Brazil nuts themselves.

There is the further objection that the private ownership of genetic material which is encouraged by the Bill is, in my view, ethically questionable. We are increasingly moving towards a patenting of life in all its forms, which I find profoundly worrying.

Such private ownership exacerbates the gap between the rich north and the poor south. We heard from the Prime Minister today and from the Secretary of State for International Development on a previous occasion that the Government are keen to close that gap. I believe them, but the Bill will not help. The resources are predominantly in the south, whereas the technology is in the north. The north therefore wants to claim the south's resources as common goods, but to charge the south for the modified result.

Biotechnology developments promote the move of genetic resources from goods that are freely available to all into goods that are privately owned. Some hon. Members may feel that the risks and objections that I have outlined are overstated, but if only one or two of them are justified, that merits concern. I have listed several objections. If only one or two are worth while, that is a matter of concern.

These concerns are held not only on the Liberal Democrat Benches. There has been much greater public debate about these matters in other European countries. Governments in Italy, Austria and Luxembourg have banned their farmers from growing genetically modified maize. The European Parliament recently demanded a halt to the sale of such maize throughout the European Union, pending further investigations into its safety. In April, 1 million Austrians signed a petition calling for a total ban on genetically altered foods.

Hon. Members will know that in Britain the NFU has expressed concerns about genetically altered crops in some respects and about key aspects of the Bill. The amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon emanate from the NFU and have Liberal Democrat support.

Particular concern has been expressed by the National Farmers Union for Scotland. Scottish farmers tend to grow older varieties of wheat, barley and potatoes as newer plant varieties often produce inferior crops under Scottish growing conditions. At present, farmers are exempt from payments on older plant varieties, but the Bill puts at risk the agreement reached on exempted varieties that were granted protection prior to 27 April 1991. Will the Minister address that specific point when he responds to the debate?

Mr. Dalyell: I represent a potato growing area in Scotland. Will the hon. Gentleman explain to the House the problem to which he refers?

Mr. Baker: I refer the hon. Gentleman to a letter from the Scottish branch of the NFU, of which I am happy to give him a copy. It points out that crop varieties currently available to Scottish farmers that pre-date 1991 do not incur any extra payments to plant breeders. However, the Bill may introduce retrospective charges.

English farmers are also unhappy with the Bill. I have received a letter from a Kent farmer, who states:

> "The main proposal under this Bill is to enable the cartel of international seed producers to levy a sum on all farm saved seed. At a time when it is Government policy to promote free enterprise and let market forces prevail it is the exact opposite of this."

The Minister may dispute that point, but that view is shared throughout the farming community.

Mr. Hayes: Would the hon. Gentleman care to comment on the studies and the research that suggest that the incidence of disease in farm-saved seed is greater than that in certified seed? That must concern him, given his anxiety about the health risks associated with seed and plant varieties.

Mr. Baker: I was not aware of that problem, but it is clearly an important point. However, the answer does not necessarily involve handing over power to transnational companies that will deal with the matter differently.

I sympathise with the points made by the farmer from Kent and I do not believe that the Bill is entirely good for farmers. We must strike a balance between the legitimate interests of seed producers and those of farmers and consumers. We are not trying to say that plant breeders have no rights and do not make an important contribution to agriculture—we recognise their valuable contribution—but we recognise that farmers and consumers have rights also. The regime presented in the Bill is based on the Plant Varieties and Seeds Act 1964, which was enacted long before genetically modified organisms had been heard of and reduces further the freedom of farmers in law in respect of saved seed. That freedom has already been eroded by technological advances that make them more dependent on chemical giants than is healthy.

It seems to me that the plant breeders have got everything they want from the Bill. For example, why is the Minister willing in clause 4 to countenance transnationals' claiming ownership of plants that occur naturally? The Prime Minister was able to amend one clause IV, so perhaps the Minister could help on this occasion. The Minister has explained why the Bill goes beyond the requirements of EU regulations. Why does clause 11 give the Minister the power to extend the duration of plant breeders' rights beyond 30 years? These and other questions must be answered, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response when the amendments are debated.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will have gathered that my colleagues and I have considerable reservations about the increasing powers of transnational companies and the detrimental effects that their acquisition of seed companies and their billions of pounds of investment in biotechnology may have on our farmers and consumers. We accept that EU regulation must be reflected in domestic legislation, but we remain very unhappy about where the legislation is leading. We do not believe that

sufficient weight has been given to the dangers and the downsides associated with the move towards genetically altered crops that the Bill effectively endorses.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I thought that it was Liberal Democrat policy to see European directives and regulations transferred directly into United Kingdom law.

Mr. Baker: The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon drew attention to an attempt to go further than the European regulation, and the Minister has clarified that point. We accept that EU regulation must be reflected in domestic legislation, but that does not necessarily mean that we agree with every decision that comes out of Europe.

We are concerned about the Bill which, in its present form, is not in the interests of our farmers and consumers. It is important to draw the attention of the House to our impending concerns about biotechnology and the way in which it is developing. Those developments must be reflected sensibly in legislation, and Ministers must address those issues carefully. For those reasons, we shall oppose the Bill's Second Reading.

5.24 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I thank the Minister for bringing forward the legislation urgently. It is extremely important in terms of our international obligations. I see the former Minister of State for the Environment, the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) nodding, and I think that all hon. Members would agree that we owe it to other countries to act swiftly in ratifying agreements. Perhaps the Minister could explain to the House the great difficulties that we would have faced if the legislation had not been introduced before the summer recess.

The problem is that genes are no respecters of borders. When the European Union decided earlier this year to admit imports of American maize that had been genetically engineered for resistance to insects, the European consumer affairs commissioner, Emma Bonino, admitted concern that the decision had been taken "under conomic pressure". The silos of Antwerp and Lorient were already bursting with produce when Washington threatened a trade war.

The previous Government set up the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes—an independent body of experts chaired by Derek Burke, former chancellor of the university of East Anglia—to assess the safety of genetically modified foods. The ACNFP compares those foods with their conventional equivalents using analytical and toxicological tests. That procedure was endorsed by the World Health Organisation.

Processed products of the genetically modified maize, which is resistant to the European corn borer and tolerant to the herbicide glufosinate-ammonium, were tested in precisely that way. The ACNFP compared the modified maize with conventional maize and concluded that the products were toxicologically and nutritionally equivalent. The EU directive on novel foods and ingredients came into force in May this year. The regulation is designed to establish a Europe-wide system for approving any such foods before they reach the market. It covers foodstuffs that contain, or have been produced from, genetically modified organisms. Their safety will be assessed using the ACNFP's established procedure. Under the regulation, foods that pass the safety test and go on sale will have to be clearly labelled.

As the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) said, Luxembourg and Austria have recently imposed their own bans on genetically modified maize. Some people with farming interests in Britain would like to do the same.

First, what is the Government's reaction to that proposal, given the pressure from America? Our trade relationship with the United States is very delicate and Governments are unwilling to override existing arrangements. However, it is a vital matter of principle and perhaps it is time to make an interim statement.

Secondly, we must ask whether we are rapidly losing the genetic diversity of our crops. That is a highly charged issue in a constituency such as Linlithgow where potatoes are the staple crop. It is even more important in East Lothian, which is famous for its seed potatoes.

There is the problem of whether we are leaving our crops too prone to pest and plague. The former Minister with responsibility for agriculture in Scotland, Lord Lindsay, thought that the position was perhaps misleading on the potato situation and blight—this is blight phytophthora infestans, which rots the crop. Agriculturalists accept that the genetic diversity of blight strains has increased with the appearance of the A2 strain of phytophthora infestans in Europe and north America, and that it is more aggressive in causing disease.

Greater freedom of trade and increased imports over the past 20 years have contributed to a significant increase in the number of blight strains, from one to about 15 in the United States. There have been alarming blight outbreaks in the US and Canada, but that alarm is partly a result of the new, aggressive strains producing blight disease where there was none before.

The situation was not helped by growers and agronomists lacking practical experience of controlling the disease over about the past 25 years. The north American authorities apparently did not give sufficiently high priority to breeding late-blight resistance into potato cultivars, and this has exposed commercial crop production to the disease. The strain P infestans US-8 has proved a major problem in parts of New England, but there is little evidence that it is more pathogenic than other strains.

Agriculture experts in Britain believe that the US-8 strain can be controlled by blight fungicides, provided that they are applied accurately and at the right time. There is no evidence that US-8 is resistant to the range of new fungicides now available.

Internationally, farmers have responded vigorously to the challenge posed by the new blight populations, and are investing effort and resources on a number of fronts. I am told that a number of international initiatives are being developed through the international programme for potato late-blight control in Mexico. The International Potato Centre in Lima, Peru, is co-ordinating a global initiative to combat the disease.

Central to a strategy for blight control is the need to increase the level of resistance in new varieties of potato that are now being developed. As I have said, I have moved on to my second question. I wish to know exactly what is being done to prevent a tragedy over the level of resistance, and when I talk of tragedy, I speak with considerable constituency feeling.

[Mr. Tam Dalyell]

Tens of thousands of my constituents are the descendants of those who came from Ireland during the 1840s and 1850s as a result of potato blight. Bearing that in mind, the idea that blight could occur again is appalling. The Bill is supposedly non-political, and so may it be, but when one thinks of the political and demographic consequences of the potato blight in Ireland in the middle of the previous century, one shudders at the thought that it could ever happen again. That is precisely the issue that we are discussing.

I do not want to rabbit on for too long, but I have a third and final question. It concerns very much the same matter that was raised properly by the hon. Member for Lewes. The issue relates to Monsanto and genetically modified seeds.

When I receive a briefing, I believe in making it clear to the House from whom I have received it. A series of questions has been asked of me by Dr. Tom Craig from Hyde in Cheshire, who is most concerned about the news that 60,000 bags of oilseed containing the "wrong genes" had been let loose by Monsanto in Canada. Dr. Craig quotes the "St. Louis Post-Dispatch", which states that Monsanto, which is based in St. Louis—it is a chemical and biotechnology giant—last month announced that it had recalled "small quantities" of a genetically engineered canola seed containing an unapproved gene that had got into the product by mistake.

The briefing continues to explain that the recalled canola seed was "Roundup ready", meaning that it had been genetically engineered to withstand dousing with Monsanto's herbicide, glyphosate, which is marketed under the trade name Roundup.

The presence of the unapproved canola gene in a commercial product revealed at a minimum that Monsanto's quality assurance programmes failed in that instance and that the biotechnology regulatory system in Canada is ineffective. The regulatory system in the US is more lax than in Canada, but what is our regulatory system like? Are we better than the Canadians?

None of us can pretend to be anything like perfect and so we cannot ask for a perfect system, especially in this instance when we are talking about very difficult matters. However, my hon. Friend the Minister comes to the Chamber with a fresh mind, and I ask for an assurance that the extremely important and pressing issues that have been raised are being tackled.

5.35 pm

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for letting me catch your eye and make my maiden speech. I understand that it is the tradition in a maiden speech to pay tribute to one's predecessor, to say a few a few words about the constituency, to make a brief reference to the subject of the debate and then to sit down quickly before taxing too much the indulgence of the House. That is exactly what I shall do. I do so most willingly in paying a tribute to my predecessor, Michael Jopling, now happily transferred—since last week—to another place as Lord Jopling.

Michael Jopling became the Member for what was then the constituency of Westmorland back in 1964. He carried on serving for the subsequent constituency of Westmorland and Lonsdale, following boundary changes that were implemented in 1983. Michael is well known to the House and much liked by hon. Members. He is enormously admired in what was his constituency as a diligent, able and effective representative of his constituents' interests. He first became a Member at my age of 33. As he is now 66, right hon. and hon. Members will understand that he spent precisely half of his life to date representing people in Westmorland and Lonsdale, and did so extremely ably.

On the national scene, Michael Jopling was the Government Chief Whip during Lady Thatcher's first term in office between 1979 and 1983. He played a critical role then in holding together a fractious Conservative party and in contributing significantly to the success of what I believe was an extremely effective, important and revolutionary time in British politics.

Subsequently, Michael served as an effective and long-serving Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the 1980s. More recently, in the present decade, he played a role in the Jopling reforms, which I think have won widespread acceptance and, indeed, enthusiasm among right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, in that they introduced civilisation to the working hours of this place.

I think that the impish sense of humour and sense of style that is characteristic of Michael Jopling was summed up by an incident that occurred when he was Minister of Agriculture. He was due to arrive at a significant agriculture show—I believe that it was in the north of England—and, at the time when the Minister was due to appear, there appeared instead a large, leather-clad gentleman on a powerful motor cycle. That produced enormous consternation among the various officials, who instructed this gentleman to depart forthwith because a Cabinet Minister was due to arrive. At that, the gentleman on the motor cycle removed his crash helmet, said that he was the Minister of Agriculture, Michael Jopling, and would they please get out of his way.

To steal one of Michael's better lines, I tell the House of what he said following a crash, which I know many right hon. and hon. Members are aware that he suffered earlier in the year. Thankfully, he has wholly recovered from it. He said that he was grateful that his translation to another place had occurred after he had had his crash and not before. He explained that if he had been translated to another place before the crash, he would not have been sure that the hospital would have sufficient quantities of blue blood.

It is a truism in the House that every hon. Member, when making a maiden speech, claims that theirs is the most beautiful constituency in the country. I am unique in that a number of hon. Members have said to me, perhaps in the spirit of some enviousness, that they, too, believe that mine is the most beautiful constituency in the country. The Minister was there yesterday. I hope that he enjoyed his visit, and that he was not subject to the traditional lakeland rain greeting.

Mr. Rooker: No, I was not.

Mr. Collins: I am glad to hear it. However, given the damp atmosphere up there, the considerations about global warming to which the Prime Minister referred earlier do not always commend themselves to people in my constituency with the seriousness that they do to those elsewhere.

Westmorland and Lonsdale contains some of the most breathtakingly beautiful countryside in the whole of the United Kingdom. It is geographically at the heart of the United Kingdom, as it falls north-south half way between John o'Groats and Land's End and east-west half way between the west coast of Northern Ireland and the east coast of England. It comprises beautiful lakes, such as Windermere and Coniston, and it includes glorious towns such as Grasmere, Ambleside and the lovely and splendid Kendal, where my home is. The Lonsdale part of the constituency comprises what historically was part of north Lancashire, the area around Cark and Cartmel and Grange-over-Sands, and stretches into the east to include areas of the Yorkshire dales around Sedbergh. Given that it includes parts of historic Lancashire and Yorkshire, hon. Members will understand that it is not clever for its Member of Parliament to express an opinion about the outcome of the Wars of the Roses, or to debate the relative merits of the test cricketers Michael Atherton and Geoff Boycott. I admire both of them, and am careful to admire both of them at all times.

Hon. Members will forgive me if I touch briefly on five matters that are of enormous importance to my constituency and constituents. The first is that Cumbria as a whole, and south Cumbria in particular, should remain part of the north-west for all regional government and regional development purposes. That is where our links are with regard to health, education, transport and other matters. I was delighted that, when the Deputy Prime Minister visited Windermere in my constituency, he said that there were no immediate plans to change the boundaries of regional government. I shall seek to hold him to that pledge.

Secondly, the Government announced a road review last week. The Cumbria-Barrow bypass is one of the projects that will be subject to an accelerated review. The High Newton widening of the A590 is of enormous significance to my constituents, not merely because of its economic importance to the whole of Cumbria, but on safety grounds. As Michael Jopling used to point out, Westmorland and Lonsdale is perhaps the only constituency where an enormously busy, dual carriageway A-road passes through a farmyard. That is quite dangerous and needs to be upgraded with some speed.

Thirdly, the vexed issue of a speed limit on Windermere is before the courts. I hope that a decision will be taken in accordance with the wishes of local people, and that it will not be taken by people sitting a long way away. I shall be writing to the Deputy Prime Minister on that matter.

Fourthly, it is important that tourism, which provides about a third of the employment in our area, should be promoted effectively and vigorously.

Fifthly and finally, it is important, as the Minister will know—I am sure that he discussed this yesterday—that small farms in general and hill farms in particular are looked after. When the Minister considers the review and reform of the common agricultural policy, he can expect strong representations from me on the importance of maintaining and expanding hill livestock compensatory allowances.

As for the Bill, I share the views that have been expressed by many right hon. and hon. Members, who have spoken about its importance and about the need for the United Kingdom to proceed rapidly towards ratifying the international conventions to which we have subscribed.

I shall make two specific points that the Minister may have time to respond to later. Under paragraph (2) of schedule 1, Ministers are given a general power to give the controller virtually any remuneration or allowances that they deem fit. I do not expect the Minister to specify the precise salary that he intends to allocate to a specific civil servant, but could he give us the banding or the grade level at which the controller will be paid? Will there be any change as a result of the Bill to the way in which the controller is paid? Will there be any element of performance-related pay and, if so, how will performance be assessed?

From a cursory reading of clause 9(7), it seems that Ministers will be able to instruct farmers to hand over information to plant breeders at the will of plant breeders. Farmers are concerned about the existing burdens of bureaucracy that are placed on them, and I should be grateful if the Minister would tell us how those powers will be exercised with a view to minimising the additional burdens that farmers face. They are interested in growing things and making money for themselves and their country; they are not interested in filling in forms.

On my arrival in the House two things surprised me. First, I was greeted by a hard-working and popular member of the House of Commons staff with the words, "Good heavens, what are you doing here?" That was not perhaps the most auspicious of beginnings. It became even less auspicious when he went on to say, "Don't you realise that you should be at Church house, where the Prime Minister is about to address you?" I explained to him that some new Members of Parliament were on the Conservative Benches rather than the Labour Benches.

The second thing pleasantly surprised me. As some hon. Members will know, my first days here were overshadowed by the tragic and sudden death of my father in a freak accident. In that time of family sorrow, I was pleased to receive messages of condolence not only from Conservative Members but from a number of Labour Members, for which I am very grateful. In particular, I want to single out the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen), who sent me a kind personal message. I was also touched to receive a message from Mr. Alastair Campbell at 10 Downing street, a man with whom I have crossed swords before and will no doubt do so again. He was also kind enough to send me a message of condolence on the death of my father.

The lesson that I learnt in that time of personal sadness was that there will and should always be important partisan differences between the two parties, but none the less human emotion and common feeling on occasions transcend those differences. I shall certainly bear that in mind for the future, and I am very grateful for those kind messages.

5.46 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins). His maiden speech was amusing and informed. His constituency does not need to be described to those of us who have visited the area: it is the most delightful part of the country. He paid due tribute to his predecessor, now Lord Jopling, whose name is

[Mr. David Kidney]

particularly apposite to the debate, given that he was previously responsible for agriculture. His name is also relevant to the modernisation of our procedures that is currently being considered by a Select Committee. The hon. Gentleman's contribution was measured and astute, and I am sure that in future debates he will be listened to with interest and he will inform our deliberations.

I shall immediately leap to the Minister's defence. He is piloting the Bill through the House against the criticisms made by the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) and the comments about food safety made by my much more senior hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell). In fairness to the Minister, he is not seeking to introduce a food safety measure. This is a measure to protect what is sometimes curiously described as intellectual property: the rights of breeders to a fair return on their research and development.

That said, although I would not go as far as the hon. Member for Lewes in complaining and worrying that the Bill is going through the House too speedily, I am puzzled about that speed. The history of this matter is that the public consultation was a letter to interested parties in February 1997. The publication of the Bill was taken over by the election campaign. We knew about the timetable last week, and I am told that there is no proper briefing about the Bill in the Library: there is only a letter by a researcher that refers to there having been no public response to the publication of the Bill, which is perhaps not surprising, given the history that I have just recounted. It is rather strange that we are speeding through the Bill so early in the Session and giving it such high priority. The 1991 international convention superseded the defence of breeders' rights to their royalties contained in the 1964 Act. The European Commission scheme is already up and running. British breeders feel obliged to register under that scheme, which causes them additional expense. I join others in cautioning against the speed with which we are proceeding to catch up.

My concern is about the royalties that will be received by breeders on farm-saved seeds that are currently free of royalties. As the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) said, under the European Commission scheme, farm-saved seeds that were free of royalties before the scheme came into force will remain so until 30 June 2001 at the earliest. If I understood my hon. Friend the Minister correctly, he gave a similar assurance in respect of farm-saved seeds in Britain.

Therefore, what is the rush today? I dusted off my copy of the Labour party manifesto to see whether the Bill was one of our promised early measures. Alas, I found no mention of plant varieties among our promises on health, education, law and order, welfare to work or youth unemployment. In fact, the word plant does not appear, although there is an allusion to the work of Professor Plant on voting procedures at future elections. Nor does the word varieties appear, although the farce of the previous Conservative Government could be described as a variety act.

Mr. Boswell: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman remembers that our former colleague, Sir Julian Critchley, wrote a book called "The Palace of Varieties", which I commend to him.

Mr. Kidney: That is most helpful, although "The Palace of Varieties" does not appear in the Labour manifesto. Nor does the word royalties, although there is a promise that there will be no changes to the monarchy.

Clause 9 deals with farm-saved seed. The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) has clearly received the same communication as I have from the National Association of Agricultural Contractors, expressing concern about how the United Kingdom scheme will mirror the European Commission scheme. It states that under the European scheme, the negotiations that were concluded last year included the promise that varieties that were in use when the 1991 convention came into force and were free of royalties will remain so for ever, not just until 2001.

In his reply to the debate, will my hon. Friend say whether that is his understanding of the agreement and whether the United Kingdom scheme will contain the same arrangement? The national association referred to Riband and Hereward, which I understand are varieties of wheat.

The British Society of Plant Breeders want all farm-saved seeds to be subject to royalty, so there is a difference between the two organisations. The hon. Member for Lewes mentioned that the Minister must strike a balance between the interests of the breeders and those of the farmers. The stated intention is to bring the United Kingdom scheme into line with the European Commission scheme. If some of the older farm-saved seeds will be free of royalties for ever under the European scheme, will my hon. Friend the Minister give the assurance that the same will apply under the United Kingdom scheme?

The importance of the issue is demonstrated by the length of the compliance cost assessment which is available from the Library. Clearly, for breeders the issue is that they should not lose out on a fair return for their research and development work, and for farmers it is that their costs should not increase too greatly as a result of the Bill. The compliance cost assessment shows that farmers' costs will rise.

Will my hon. Friend confirm two points when he replies to the debate? Perhaps if I put them in a memorable way he will remember to deal with them, so I ask him this:

When farm saved-seed is royalty bearing,

When the deed is finally done,

How then will older seeds be faring

And will it be from July 2001?

5.55 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): It was a particular pleasure to hear the maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins). I had the privilege to be a colleague of his for some years elsewhere and I know that it was the first of many significant and important contributions that he will make in the House and that many hon. Members look forward to hearing him in future.

As the Minister explained, the Bill enables the United Kingdom to implement the 1991 international convention for the protection of new varieties of plants. I believe that, for that reason, it will generally be regarded as a useful reform.

Within my constituency of South Cambridgeshire, I represent not only many excellent farmers, but Plant Breeding International at Trumpington. PBI in its current status was created in 1987 when Unilever acquired from

the Government the plant breeding and applied scientific resources of the Plant Breeding Institute and the National Seed Development Organisation.

It may be helpful to hon. Members to know that PBI is the leading plant breeding company in the United Kingdom. It is dominant in respect of winter wheat, bean and oat and winter and spring malting barley. It has a high share of potato seed in the United Kingdom and a significant presence in the breeding of new oilseed rape varieties.

A single successful plant variety can take between eight and 20 years to develop and involves the screening of millions of varieties. The success and economic significance of this activity can be illustrated by the development over recent decades of bread-making wheats. In the 1950s, the average white loaf in the United Kingdom contained only 20 per cent. home-grown grain. With Avalon in 1980, Mercia in 1986 and Hereward in 1991—which the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) mentioned—PBI continuously improved the yield, quality and agronomic characteristics of United Kingdom wheat varieties.

Today, in a year favourable climatically to cereal production, the United Kingdom white loaf is almost entirely home produced. That progress is not necessarily the result of genetic modification, but of the successful application of selective breeding.

That brings me to the points that were made by the hon. Member for Lewes. It seems to me that there are two problems with what he suggested. First, proving a negative and trying to demonstrate that there are no health or other hazards associated with genetically modified food will be a difficult process. Secondly, and more importantly in the context of today's debate, I do not share his view that the points that he raised are relevant to our consideration of the Bill. The purpose of the Bill is not to determine whether genetically modified foods should be brought into use in Britain, but to make sure that when seeds and varieties are brought into use there is proper recompense to the holders of the rights and intellectual property vested in their development.

Mr. Baker: The point I wanted to make was that the Bill facilitates the work of plant breeders who want to develop genetically engineered crops and makes it more difficult for others to oppose them. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that where there is doubt, the precautionary principle should apply and if we are not sure whether something is safe, we ought not to allow it?

Mr. Lansley: The precautionary principle has to be judged in the context of the balance of the evidence and the best scientific evidence available at the time. It seems to me that we should not remove or obstruct the proper return for the intellectual property vested in the development of seeds and varieties that are brought into use and tamper with the Bill in order to achieve some objective relating to genetically modified foods. Those issues are developing all the time and if they are to be tackled by legislation, they should be tackled separately instead of being used to obstruct an important and valuable Bill.

More than 200 staff are employed by the PBI on breeding research and analytical work, and 80 per cent. of its income stream derives from royalties. Therefore, it is essential that we strive to give adequate protection to the intellectual property vested in the product of research and development. That is a general principle to which we should hold, but it should not be extended to allow excessive returns to the holder of rights through monopolistic exploitation. A balance must be struck. In the past, the balance was not right. The use of farm-saved seed without payment of a royalty for the rights of the original propagating material failed to give proper recompense to the owner of the rights, failed to provide the resources from which new development has to spring and gave a perverse incentive not to switch to improved varieties.

That the farm-saved seed should carry a lower royalty than certified seed is a necessary part of striking the balance. Another part of the balance must be a power for the controller of plant variety rights to issue a compulsory licence. I am aware that the National Farmers Union regards as ineffective the provisions derived from the Plant Varieties and Seeds Act 1964 and carried into the Bill. The Bill essentially re-enacts those provisions with some clarification. The power proposed in the Bill seems to me to be sufficient for the purpose and, if the NFU were to take up specific issues with the controller, that might be the best way to demonstrate any mischief that can be remedied.

While the provisions on farm-saved seed are intended to be dealt with by order, it would have been clearer if the transition by autumn 2001 had been on the face of the Bill. I hope that the Minister, when he replies, will further reinforce the Government's intention that all protected varieties should be eligible for remuneration on farm-saved seed from autumn 2001. I listened carefully to the Minister's responses to earlier questions, and it is important that remuneration should not be provided before 30 June 2001. The holders of plant-breeding rights should also be aware that the decision will not be unduly prolonged beyond that point.

It has been raised with the Ministry separately that the provisions in clause 13 for remedies for infringement do not specify whether action can be taken when a farmer fails in his obligation to pay equitable remuneration on farm-saved seed. The holder will not be able to sue him for infringement of plant variety rights. The Bill could reflect the provisions in the European regulation, articles 17 and 18. I should be grateful if the Minister could say whether the present provision, in its reference to infringements of other proprietary rights, is sufficient for that purpose.

On the question of penalties, the Minister will be aware that, in some circumstances, the holders of seeds sell original seeds through local markets. Sometimes that happens inadvertently, but some offenders are persistent. The penalty for such infringement is £1,000, but representations have been made to me that the penalties could and should be higher. I should be grateful for the Minister's view on that point. Subject to those points, I welcome the Bill as a helpful step in providing a framework of proprietary rights to an industry that is increasingly important in ensuring that food production meets the economic, environmental and quality demands of the market place.

6.3 pm

Mr. Colin Breed (South–East Cornwall): I am grateful for the opportunity to make the second maiden speech today. I was surprised that another hon. Member was

[Mr. Colin Breed]

making a maiden speech on this subject, but I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) on his speech. I share with him the delight of representing an area of outstanding natural beauty, although I do not wish to debate the relative merits of our constituencies. South-east Cornwall, like the rest of Cornwall, and like Westmorland, is a beautiful area.

My constituency covers the part of Cornwall that is just over the border from England, marked by the River Tamar. It is a largely rural area, and this debate has great significance to the agricultural community. My constituency is mostly countryside and moorland, but it also has long stretches of coastline and river. The fishing community in Looe has been much exercised recently by the fisheries debate.

Like much of Cornwall, south-east Cornwall has suffered recently from the rundown of Her Majesty's dockyard in Devonport. The unemployment generated by the lack of employment opportunities in the dockyard has hit south-east Cornwall hard, and we have some of the highest unemployment rates and lowest wages in the country.

I have pleasure in paying tribute to my predecessor, Sir Robert Hicks, who was a Member much admired and respected on both sides of the House and in the constituency. He held the seat for some 27 years, with the exception of a six-month interregnum in 1974, when the seat was held by my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler). That six-month period is a record for brevity in representing the seat, and I firmly hope to leave that record intact. Sir Robert was a popular constituency Member, and I know that the House will join me in wishing him and Lady Hicks a long, happy and healthy retirement.

Plant diversification is extremely important to the future of south-east Cornwall and, indeed, the planet. New varieties are being encouraged in several ways—including through genetic manipulation, as we have heard—but we must not let the prime cultivars become extinct. The rush to produce new varieties could bring the extinction of many existing varieties that may be considered uneconomic.

I am delighted to remind the House of the recent award of nearly £40 million of millennium and lottery money for the creation of the Eden Botanical Institute, to be constructed near St. Blazey in my constituency. The institute will be the first major foundation to be based on the principles of the Rio convention, about which we have all learnt more recently.

The institute's living plant and seed collection will give pleasure to millions of visitors and will present to the public the central concerns of land use, including the stewardship of nature and the associated conservation of habitat and species. In short, it will ensure that variety is maintained and that sensible diversification is undertaken for the future. The institute will demonstrate the need to produce food economically, as valuable crops, to sustain the world's population, and will ensure that plant variety is an important factor.

That will not mean a diminution of plant varieties, or a concentration on varieties produced by genetically modified organisms. It will ensure that the old seeds and old plants will continue, because therein lies the possibility of future genetic material.

The institute will strive to bring together those who work for real conservation of both wild and primitive cultivars, and for economic crop production. An effective resolution of those often conflicting interests needs to be sought.

Plant variety and diversification will be at the heart of the scientific endeavour in the Eden institute. The institute is only just completing its planning stage, but I believe that, when it is finished, it will provide a considerable resource for conservation projects, not only nationally but internationally.

The institute offers not only this country but the world the opportunity to restore and maintain the old plants, rather than rushing to new varieties simply for economic purposes. In the years to come, we may well value its work. We may find, for example, that some of the new varieties now being produced, which will be given licences and which will be paid for by farmers, do not provide quite the value that we now believe they will.

I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the debate and to raise the exciting subject of the Eden institute. The institute will provide a welcome boost for the local economy and, we hope will be a major visitor attraction of great interest to everyone. Above all, it will make a contribution to conservation studies that will make it a national centre of excellence, vital for plant diversification and variety in the future.

6.11 pm

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): I first pay tribute to the hon. Member for South–East Cornwall (Mr. Breed), who has just made his maiden speech and introduced his lovely constituency and its interesting developments. He also paid a gracious tribute to our old friend Sir Robert Hicks.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) for his elegant maiden speech, and especially for his warm praise of Michael Jopling, with whom I, too, had the privilege of working in the 1980s, when he was Minister of Agriculture. He is held in great affection in the House.

I welcome my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) and my hon. Friend the Member for South–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) to their new duties on the Opposition Front Bench. I also welcome the Minister of State, with whom we have already had exchanges in the House.

I make it clear at the outset that I have no problem with the Bill, and do not seek to detain the House. The debate is something of a valediction to matters agricultural for me, as I leave my Front-Bench responsibilities for that subject in order—to coin a phrase—to spend more time with the tax system.

I shall give the House three reasons for my taking part in the debate. First, I admit that, at the tender age of about 12, fired with enthusiasm by a lively father who was a farmer with a strong technical interest, and was prepared to take his son at an early age to the National Institute of Agricultural Botany and other such places, I developed the ambition to be a plant breeder—an ambition which I never succeeded in fulfilling.

My second reason for involving myself briefly in the debate is that, until a month or two ago, I had ministerial responsibility for its subject matter, and I should like to

pay tribute to the officials who worked for me, as they now do for the Minister. He is excellently served in that respect.

Thirdly, this is the appropriate moment to declare an interest. As is recorded in the Register of Members' Interests, I am a farmer, so I have a personal interest in the debate. More to the point, I grow Riband, which the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) mentioned. Even more to the point, I save my own seed, as I always have an eye to economy. That interest has not yet been introduced, wide though the debate has ranged. I have the seed treated by the chairman of the negotiating committee of the National Association of Agricultural Contractors, my near neighbour and good friend, Tim Rogers, who looks after it for me.

I wish to record my appreciation of the wisdom of our predecessors, who in 1964—I make no party point—legislated for the first time to protect plant varieties. I remember that, at that time, there was concern that yields of cereals, in particular, had reached a plateau.

We had made advances after the war, as we moved from Squarehead's Master and the other old varieties. For one awful moment, I thought that the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall intended to make the growing of Squarehead's Master or Little Joss compulsory. But he did not go quite that far.

We have now moved on to the Bersée and the Cappelle. Both are French, incidentally. None the less, in 1964 we had a British regime for the first time. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) said, it takes time to build up a breeding programme, but, as a result of that regime, we intensified and diversified the nature of plant breeding—especially, but not exclusively, cereal breeding—in this country.

From that time on, we started a rapid expansion in the results of British agriculture and became one of the world leaders in plant breeding. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, roughly, we were adding about 2 per cent. annually to cereal yields. In due course, that caused trouble for the European common agricultural policy.

Leaving that aside, however, if one is using land, it must be right to use it effectively. There was a 2 per cent. annual increase in yield, about half of which was directly attributable to modern varieties. I argue that those varieties would not have become available without the royalty regime introduced in 1964.

The yield improvements continued—but there was also an important technical development, which leads me on to some of the other comments that I want to make. Superimposed on the yield improvements of the 1980s was an increasing emphasis, both by breeders and in the analysis of breeding by institutions such as the National Institute of Agricultural Botany, on resistance to disease and on balancing the mix of varieties and offerings, so that they were both safer to grow and more appropriate for the market.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) was worried about genetically modified materials. It is almost 25 years since a particular variety, Rothwell Purdix, became the dominant United Kingdom wheat variety. It had single-gene resistance to yellow rust, and the whole variety was completely destroyed in one season.

This year, it happens that we have another yellow rust outbreak, and one or two of the major varieties now grown in this country, such as Brigadier, seem to be rather susceptible. However, as a result of diversification of variety, plus chemical protection where appropriate, especially on the more susceptible varieties, the situation has been contained this year—in my judgment, at least.

All is by no means gloom and doom. British cereal breeding can hold its head up. It has diversified from simple pursuit of high yields to a much more varied and appropriate offering for modern conditions, and continues to improve under the present regime.

The Bill will reinforce that regime, bring it up to date and extend it. That is why I welcome it, and I should like to touch on three features that have been brought out in the debate, two of which arose initially from the speech by the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker).

The first is internationalisation. I regard that as broadly a positive factor and, until today, I had thought that the Liberal Democrats tended to take the same view. The legislation is implementing an international as well as a European obligation, and I welcome that.

We certainly cannot run away from the rest of the world and its breeding programmes to conduct a private policy behind closed doors on these islands. We must be prepared to be internationalist—although, at the same time, under the regime that we have had since the 1960s, private and individual breeders still exist. There are small breeding companies as well as large ones in the British Society of Plant Breeders.

The second factor that concerns me and the hon. Member for Linlithgow—who is right to say that these matters should be debated—is the question of genetic manipulation. There are different kinds of genetic manipulation, according to whether one is importing genes from a completely different species or is simply bringing in a particular gene to help disease resistance from broadly within the same family of plants.

It is worth recording that if one is a plant breeder—as I hoped to be all those years ago—one is in effect manipulating genes to produce a particular result. There is no absolute conceptual difference between that and using modern techniques such as gene splicing. The important thing is that they should not give rise to concerns about the environment.

The hon. Member for Lewes did not pay sufficient heed to the existence of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment—which is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment—as against the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes, which is the responsibility of MAFF. These matters are looked at carefully and, in my ministerial days, I discussed them not just with farmers and plant breeders, but with environmentalists.

We have a sensible regime, which will take the precautionary principle seriously and will make good use of it. We should not run away from the concept of genetic modification, although we must watch it. As we have heard, it does not adhere directly to the Bill as drafted.

Mr. Dalyell: During his time as a Minister, did the hon. Gentleman give any thought to recent American pressure in relation to maize and other items on the whole question of genetically modified organisms?

Mr. Boswell: I am slightly concerned about that. I personally felt that, in the interests of genetic

[Mr. Boswell]

modification, that was not the best way to handle the maize issue, and the inability to secure traceability and labelling was an unfortunate negative. Eventually, I hope that that will be a lesson learned by the producers of this material, as well as those seeking to use it.

I was about to make the point that genetic manipulation, if used properly—for example, if it enhances disease resistance or enables less use of pesticides—can be positive for the environment. It is not a one-way street.

My third point concerns what I might term specialist and minority uses. I mentioned that I did not feel that the hon. Member for Lewes quite gave sufficient credence to the fact that people still use the materials, even as owner-breeders. I have a cousin—as I discovered rather surprisingly during a Select Committee visit to New Zealand some years ago—whose family developed the Braeburn apple. I am not sure whether that is a positive in British terms, although, as I am no longer a Minister, I can say that, in my opinion, it is a very good apple.

The apple was found growing in the drive of their farm in 1952. It was an indigenous apple and no one knew its breeding. But it was developed, selected and commercialised, and took 15 to 20 years to reach this country. I am glad it did, but whether it is regarded as a native or a developed cultivated plant is an interesting question.

In my experience, there was a steady drip of correspondence on minority varieties that were not on the European descriptive list. There was reasonable concern from amateur gardeners, who felt that they might be prevented from selling seed to their neighbours, but we had ways around this problem which were satisfactory.

I visited the Henry Doubleday research institute—like other hon. Members, I am interested in that side, as well as the purely industrial and commercial crops—which found a way of sending material out in plain envelopes and giving it away so that it was not commercialised. Perhaps unusually, we were in alliance with the French in trying to persuade the Commission into some kind of derogation, which would make things a little more legitimate. I should be grateful if the Minister could spare a moment on that matter during his winding-up speech.

I wish to refer to clause 9 and the question of farm-saved seed, a direct interest of myself and agriculture contractors. I accept that the Minister has given assurances in good faith, although he may wish to reflect on whether they are the right assurances, or whether they could have been included in the Bill. It is an important matter, which will not entirely go away. It is not just the existing varieties that are involved.

I have said that I grow Riband, but I could easily convert to Blaze or Consort, and I could possibly get another 1 or 2 per cent. uplift in yield, or better disease resistance. In making a decision, I shall have a mind to the commercial prospects of the two.

I hope that the Minister will remember that that is one aspect. Assurances have been given as part of a complex deal to produce a sensibly lower level, which I always interpret to mean a lower level and a sensible level. I am glad that the parties were able to negotiate that without ministerial interference, but it is a delicately poised settlement, and he has sought with good will not to disturb it.

The final point is the speed of the Bill. The Minister was right to say that the Bill was out in draft and had been thought about—I say this delicately—for a year or two before that. I am pleased that it is now going forward. Nevertheless, as he well knows, a Minister does not get up every morning and read his potential Bill in detail before shaving. He deals with it and is briefed on it when it gets to the white heat of a parliamentary debate. At that moment, Ministers—whether in this or any other Department—start seeing the snags, angles and concerns about it. The trade associations will also make their representations at that moment.

The Minister wants to get the Bill through today, and we will not seek in any way to inhibit that, but I hope that he will feel receptive to any comments made here and by the trade associations, because he and I wish to give the Bill a fair wind and to make sure that it works effectively to underpin what is already a British success story—the success of British plant breeders and our cereal-growing industry.

6.26 pm

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I should like to start by supporting the comment of my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) that this is a British success story. The seed industry in this country is now worth between £350 million and £400 million per year, and one should not ignore the approximately £35 million of royalties from the activities that we are discussing. We are among the leading countries in plant breeding, although others, such as Holland, might claim greater status. For that reason, the Bill is a suitable and appropriate clarification of the position, and a clarification of the relationship between the farmer and the breeder.

It seemed to me that there were three misconceptions in the speech of the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker). The first was his antipathy to the internationalism that is increasingly prevalent in this field. It is unavoidable—the nature of such developments are, almost by definition, international. The collaboration between breeders across the world is an inevitable consequence of improving technology and communications, and it will not go away.

As colleagues have pointed out, the British Society of Plant Breeders has about 45 members, including some independents—one of the top seven plant breeders is situated in my constituency. The picture is not one sided; there is diversity. The organisations represent the small breeders, the people who work in highly specialist fields and those who work with particular crop varieties and not merely the big companies to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

The second error made by the hon. Member for Lewes was to confuse this Bill with that affecting genetically modified organism technology.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman must address the Chair and not another hon. Member.

Mr. Hayes: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

While the Bill will have some impact in that respect, it is not principally a means by which we will affect the controls on such developments. The hon. Gentleman perhaps exaggerated the impact that these proposals will

have on GMO technology. Thirdly, he displayed a certain naivety about the relationship between the farmer and the breeder. Clearly, it is in farmers' best interests to have a positive and co-operative relationship with breeders. For the most part, it is not true to say that there is a conflict of interest between the farmer and the breeder.

On the margin, there may be some points of difference. The National Farmers Union will, of course, argue the farmers' case and I am an associate member of that union, so I certainly have no prejudice against farmers. However, the vast majority of farmers and growers will welcome the co-operation with breeders that the Bill embodies and will respect the fact that without plant breeders we would not have made the great advances in yield, quality and disease resistance that have been made in the past 40 years. In all those respects, farmers have clearly benefited substantially from the work of plant breeders. Most farmers would readily recognise that, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry, who speaks with considerably more authority than I do, he being a practitioner.

I shall comment on three aspects of the Bill. First, the Minister's comment about the relationship between farmers and breeders and the comment that he was happy to leave matters of royalty on farm-saved seed to informal agreement are valid, but such an arrangement would need to be monitored carefully. Farmers are understandably concerned that unrestricted control of royalties would not be desirable. Future discussions between farmers and breeders need to be studied carefully. One would not want unrestricted control to pass into the hands of the breeders through the degree of informality that the Minister mentioned. Informality is fine, but it needs to be carefully monitored.

Secondly, I hope that the Minister will clarify the nature of the penalties for those who choose not to abide by the proposed legislation.

Thirdly, perhaps the Minister can clarify the interface between these proposals and the legislation affecting GMO technology, to which the hon. Member for Lewes referred. The Minister alluded to it, as did several hon. Members. I and other hon. Members would welcome such clarification, as would the hon. Member for Lewes, I imagine, judging by what he said.

On exclusion until 2001, much has been made of the fact that plant varieties have limited lives. That is certainly true of cereal crops, but it varies from one crop to another. For all sorts of commercial rather than technological reasons, potatoes have a much longer life cycle than many other crops. Many of the older varieties affected by control to 2001 will be played out beyond that date, as my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry said. One wonders—in the interests of farmers—whether the exclusion might continue in perpetuity. This is a personal view, but it is certainly one which has been expressed by a number of farmers and I do not think I am breaking any confidences when I say that the British Society of Plant Breeders would not be entirely unsympathetic to that view. The impact of such an extension of the exclusion would diminish over the years as the varieties became rarer. Many people would therefore welcome some extension beyond 2001.

With those minor caveats, suggestions and questions I welcome the Bill, as have other hon. Members, on the grounds that it clarifies and codifies the situation and brings it up to date. I am sure that hon. Members will agree that the legislation should be based on the premise that the relationship between farmers and breeders is usually, although not always, one of co-operation and not conflict. We need legislation that would underpin that co-operation for the benefit of both farmers and breeders, as well as of the wider community.

6.36 pm

Mr. James Paice (South–East Cambridgeshire): I must start my brief contribution by informing the House of my interests in this matter. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), I grow corn, albeit on a much smaller scale. I have just one field of corn on my property, but the fact remains that I grow it—this year, it is Riband—and, therefore, I have an interest to declare.

I am also privileged to represent the British Society of Plant Breeders, which has its headquarters in my constituency, a number of plant breeding companies—similar to those represented by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley)—and, of course, many farmers.

This debate has been marked out by the exceptional maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins). As is traditional, he described his constituency in glowing terms and all of us who know it will accept them. At times when one listens to maiden speeches, it takes a little broad mindedness to accept the glowing terms ascribed to some areas, but that is certainly not true of his constituency. He also paid rightful tribute to our great friend Michael Jopling, who is now a colleague in the other place.

Coincidentally, I first met Michael Jopling in 1975, when he held the post that I now occupy—the No. 2 Opposition spokesman on agriculture. That was at the time of the then Labour Government's destruction of the farm tenancy system by the introduction of inherited tenancies, which led to the drying up of supply, as we believed that it would.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale on an exceptionally good and clear speech about his constituency and his views on this issue. I was particularly interested in his comments about the controller's salary. I noticed the look of consternation that passed down the row of officials as soon as civil servants' salaries were raised. That bodes well for my hon. Friend's future contributions in the House. I also share his recognition and experience of the way in which, despite our differences, the House can come together at times of individual trial and grief. I, too, lost my father a few months ago, and I entirely share my hon. Friend's feelings.

Most of the issues that have arisen are probably best dealt with in amendments, and I shall certainly press the Minister on them in Committee, so for now I want only to refer to one or two contributions. My hon. Friend—and neighbour—the Member for South Cambridgeshire represents part of the area that I formerly represented, including much of the National Institute of Agricultural Botany, where so much work is done with plant varieties and purity testing and where the approved lists originate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry demonstrated, as one would expect from a former Minister responsible for such matters, his immense knowledge of the subject. I look forward to his

[Mr. James Paice]

contributions in Committee. He reminded us of many of the old varieties and I cannot forbear reminiscing for a moment: years ago, I was a qualified crop inspector, inspecting thousands of acres of cereals and legumes, as standing crops, for varietal purity. Sadly, other things got in the way and my qualifications have long since lapsed, but I recall many enjoyable and not so enjoyable days traipsing through standing crops with my yardstick—it was a yardstick in those days—testing for purity.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), who also has a huge constituency, expressed a view that I hold dear: that ultimately the interests of farmers and of plant breeders must be the same. They are interdependent, and that is why the Opposition welcome the Bill, which originated in our time in government. It represents the convention for the protection of new varieties of plants—the UPOV convention—and the European Union regulation and has had a long and sometimes painful birth. I am aware, from my constituency involvement, of how long it took for the discussions between farmers and breeders to come up with an agreement on farm-saved seed. They now recognise their interdependence.

We have some questions of detail, but not of principle, so we do not intend to oppose the Bill; if it is pressed to a Division, we shall support it.

6.41 pm

Mr. Rooker: I shall reply to the debate succinctly, on the basis that questions of detail can be dealt with in Committee. I am grateful for the constructive way in which hon. Members have approached what is a complex and technical Bill. There is an enormous amount of knowledge around from outside interests, and perhaps that has helped us to have a balanced and supportive debate. It is also clear that some hon. Members have taken the trouble to read the compliance cost assessment and check what is in the Library; I am grateful for that, and for the back-up that has been available to me as a new Minister in preparing for the debate.

The hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) asked various questions, many of which I hope that he will not feel obliged to repeat in Committee; nevertheless, I will do my best to give him detailed answers in Committee, rather than now. I want to disabuse him straight away of any impression that the Bill allows or provides for retrospective payments; it does not and there are no grounds for supposing that it does.

We have an enormously complex protective arrangement to ensure that the food that gets on the table in our homes is safe. I freely admit—I have said it both inside and outside the House since taking office—as someone who was not involved with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the past, that I was astonished to see the hundreds of people working in MAFF on food safety and regulation, in a detailed, supportive and professional way, whose work has been completely overshadowed by the few big crises that we all know about and need not go into now.

No new foods can be created in this country without being constantly checked and tested. No new products or ingredients are allowed into the country without checks and testing. Nothing should happen by accident, and if accidents happen we have a procedure for dealing with them—and we even intend to tighten the procedures that we have inherited.

Mr. Baker: If food safety has been such a roaring success in recent years, why are the Government introducing a food standards agency?

Mr. Rooker: We are introducing legislation to transfer the very people whom I have just described, plus others in the Department of Health, to allow them to work in a more concentrated fashion. They will be seen to be completely independent of the Government, so when problems arise it will not have to be a Minister who is the arbiter. If hon. Members are not interested in having a food standards agency, I shall be glad to debate it with them when we introduce the relevant Bill. We want to improve the regulatory system and boost consumer confidence.

The hon. Member for Lewes gave the impression that food ingredients and seeds are uncontrolled and appear on the plate in consumers' homes without any checks. That is simply not the case, as I shall make clear when we introduce the other legislation. I welcome his amendments, however, as we are proceeding not in a rush but at the convenience of the House.

The House will rule on whether we proceed to further stages. As is right with such a Bill, announced only last week, starred amendments have been selected. I freely admit that the Government originally contemplated introducing the Bill in the other place, but the timetable following the general election for the preparation of legislation was such that there was a convenient slot that we thought it right to take advantage of today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) raised many issues, some of which were well outside the scope of the Bill, but I understand why he raised them. He asked about the strength of our regulatory system. I told him that we have in place the necessary regulatory systems, through the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, to ensure that genetically modified plants are not released into the environment. As the hon. Member for Daventry rightly said, that is a matter for the Department of the Environment.

On food safety, my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow recognised that no new foods could be made available to the public without clearance from the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes. A few weeks ago, I sat in on a meeting of that Committee. I freely admit that I am an ordinary production engineer and the science is way over my head, but the committee is incredibly high powered, with people with doctorates, vice-chancellors and professors around the table. There are two non-scientific members, one of whom is specifically concerned with ethics; I believe that that is almost unique among the Government's advisory committees.

People are concerned about novel foods and processes. We did not invent the committee; its members were already in place when we came to office. It is not a secret science committee: it has a consumer input and an ethical input, and that is extremely important. We want to reinforce that contribution in other bodies involved with the Ministry.

Mr. Dalyell: Is there any disadvantage in having two committees running in parallel, one responsible to MAFF and the other to the Department of the Environment?

Mr. Rooker: I know of no difficulty, but there is clearly incredible cross-fertilisation between Whitehall Departments. Sometimes it is right that matters are dealt with by more than one Ministry so that a different set of minds is brought to them. The point will be raised in more detail later in the year, or certainly next year, when we produce a draft Bill on the food standards agency following the White Paper.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins). I have no problem in saying that the Lake district is the most beautiful part of my country. I really enjoyed my ministerial away-day in his constituency yesterday. It was my second away-day out of London, both of which have been in the north of England. I was educated, informed and made extremely welcome by all the people whom I met in the environmentally sensitive farm that I visited, in the farm shops and while launching the booklet. I freely admitted that the farm shop innovation was not thought up by this Government but was something that we carried through happily from the previous Government. I pay tribute to the previous documents that MAFF has published on farm diversification.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale made a remarkable maiden speech. He rightly reminded us of Michael Jopling, to whom hon. Members who were in the House before the general election are grateful. It took 34 months for us to debate the Jopling report after it was published. I always said that that was a disgrace. A questionnaire found that 85 to 90 per cent. of hon. Members agreed with all its recommendations and could not understand why we had had to wait for 34 months to civilise our arrangements. That involved not cutting but reorganising our hours. We pay tribute to Michael Jopling for that.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale asked about the power of the controller and the assistant controller. I make no bones about it. I am not prepared—I do not think that any Minister would be—to discuss the individual salaries of professional, career civil servants. This is not a quango. They are career civil servants appointed by Ministers. One of their duties is dealing with plant varieties. I asked about the other duties that they perform this morning. They deal with plant variety rights, national listing—which was raised by many hon. Members but has nothing to do with the Bill—and seed certification. The plant variety office, in respect of all the factors that I mentioned, is operated by about three dozen people; the plant variety rights system costs about £1 million a year. All of that is recovered from the fees that plant breeders pay; there is no cost to the taxpayer. When officials represent Britain abroad, plant breeders do not pay; that is a taxpayer-funded job because it is a matter of public interest. He would not expect me to go beyond that.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale asked about the powers of Ministers to instruct farmers to hand over information under clause 9. Farmers will have to give exactly the same information as they do under the EC system, including their name and address, the amount of seeds saved, the name and address of the processor and, if appropriate, when they previously saved seed of the variety concerned. That is not onerous. Processors will have to give breeders the same information as they have given under the EC system, including name and address, the name and address of the person for whom they processed the farm-saved seed, and the amount and variety they processed. That is not onerous. If anyone can put a case that it is, I shall consider it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) asked about the speed of the Bill's passage. I hope that I have covered that point. I compliment him for taking the trouble to find out that notes on clauses were in the Vote Office and that the compliance cost assessment was in the Library. That is a very helpful document and the only one in which figures are given. I commend it to hon. Members. They may find it useful reading while we are having the Division that the Liberals may call.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) exemplified the knowledge of hon. Members who represent both breeders and farmers. It is helpful to have Members who represent both sides. They understand the balance that has been struck. They realise that breeders cannot operate without farmers and vice versa; they are interdependent.

The second maiden speech was that of the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed), to whom I pay tribute. I note his compliments to Robert Hicks. I was first elected in February 1974, and remember that the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) was here during the interregnum in 1974 and then out of the House for all the years that Robert Hicks looked after the constituency so ably. Everyone will be grateful for his tribute to Robert Hicks. I wish his constituency well with the Eden institute. I hope that the lottery money for it does not take as long as that for some projects in my constituency. That is a constant problem for hon. Members.

The hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), a fellow midlands Member, supported the Bill. He was right to pay tribute, as do I, to the work of the officers, officials and scientists who put the Bill together over the years. If the issue had been different on 1 May he would probably have been standing at the Dispatch Box now. He understood the need for speed. We are not rushing against anyone's wishes. We will do our best.

I accept that a Bill that goes through all its stages in one day, if that is the wish of the House, deserves very detailed consideration in the other place. The Government will be more than susceptible to amendments tabled and comments made in the other place. If the other place amends the Bill, we should be happy to provide the necessary time, as would be our duty, to ensure that the House can properly debate the issue. I give that assurance. Given what I have said for about 20 years as a Back Bencher, I would do nothing else.

I am grateful for the support of the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) for the Bill and for his comments on the speech of the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker), which I found helpful even though he had to do a 180 deg turn to the Chair to present them. He pointed out that co-operation of farmers and breeders is crucial. He asked about genetically modified organism technology. I cannot go into detail now, but there will be an opportunity to do so in Committee or on Third Reading. I will certainly give him an answer. Whenever we discuss such issues, hon. Members will raise GMO technology. I am as concerned as anyone: I am an

[Mr. Rooker]

ordinary consumer. Where genetic modification is involved, there must be complete openness. Public confidence must be built, and that can come only from openness of information on labelling and on technology transfer and exchanges. It is vital that we do that. We do not want to put people off. GMO technology will happen anyway, so Britain cannot opt out. We and our farmers would suffer economically. Our technology and economic interests would suffer if we sought to opt out of technology.

The hon. Member for Daventry asked about smaller varieties. That is a question for the national list. Without going over the matter in greater detail, having had a quick opportunity to take advice, my views are generally those that he expressed in writing to people when he was a Minister. Clearly, we will press for changes in the Community. It would be churlish to quote him back his own letter, but I hope that he will be satisfied that that is the view that I am currently content to take. I hope that the House will give the Bill a Second Reading.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 289, Noes 35.

Division No. 38] **[6.58 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne *(Aberd'n S)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Boswell, Tim
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Christine
Byers, Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Collins, Tim
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Day, Stephen
Dean, Ms Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Ms Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Hayes, John
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Ms Melanie (Welwyn Hatfield)
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Ms Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Miss Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lansley, Andrew
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Lock, David
Love, Andy
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Organ, Mrs Diana
Paice, James
Pearson, Ian
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris

Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Ms Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Streeter, Gary
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Vis, Dr Rudi
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Dr Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wright, Tony *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. Graham Allen.

NOES

Baker, Norman
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Cotter, Brian
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles
(Ross Skye & Inverness W)
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Maclennan, Robert
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Opik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro & St Austell)*
Wallace, James
Webb, Steven
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Paul Tyler and
Mr. Andrew Stunell.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills),

That the Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House.—[*Mr. Betts.*]

Question agreed to.

Bill immediately considered in Committee.

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I have a statement to make. On the list of manuscript amendments some hon. Members may have in their hands, the amendments are numbered 1 to 4. On the Chairman of Ways and Means' provisional selection of amendments, the manuscript amendments are listed as amendments Nos. 9 to 12. The Chair will ensure that hon. Members will know which amendment is before the Committee when each debate starts.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

THE PLANT VARIETY RIGHTS OFFICE

7.15 pm

Mr. Baker: I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 1, line 25, after subsection (1), insert—

'(1A) The Controller shall each year make a report of his activities to Ministers, who shall lay a copy of every such report before Parliament.'.

The amendment relates to the accountability of the controller of plant variety rights. I shall not take up too much of the Committee's time, because we had the substantive debate on Second Reading and now we want to concentrate on minor, technical points.

I am grateful to the Minister for having said earlier that he recognised the need for the public to have confidence in the food safety system. He also recognised the need for openness in that system. Given the concerns that have been expressed, not only by Liberal Democrat Members, but, to a lesser extent, by Labour and Conservative Members, I hope that he will look favourably on the amendment. Given the uncertainty in some people's minds about the direction in which those matters are progressing, it is an important safeguard for openness in food safety that, once a year, Ministers should have to lay a copy of such a report before Parliament. That is also in line with the Minister's thinking, so I hope that he will accept the amendment.

Mr. Rooker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his amendment. If a report on the activities of the controller were not already to be published, I would have accepted the amendment; however, what the hon. Gentleman is asking for already happens.

The decisions that the controller proposes to take or has taken are required to be published—and are published—monthly in the *Plant Varieties and Seeds Gazette*, of which I have obtained a copy for my better information. An annual edition of the gazette is published each year and provides details of all grants of rights in effect at the time of publication and information showing, for example, the name of the variety, who holds the rights and when they expire. The gazette is publicly available. Other information in applications for rights and rights granted is held on the registers in the plant variety rights office. Those may be inspected by members of the public during normal office hours and copies of entries on the register are freely available on request.

A substantial amount of information is therefore already published. More information is in the public domain and may be inspected or copies obtained on request. The amendment is therefore unnecessary. I have been told that no part of the work of the plant variety rights office is not already published and available. Accountability to the House is therefore ensured.

[Mr. Rooker]

Mr. Baker: I am grateful to the Minister for listing the ways in which members of the public and Members of Parliament can obtain information about the activities of the controller. Perhaps the amendment was badly worded; what I sought to achieve was that, each year, Parliament would have an opportunity to debate those matters, rather than the information being published in a form that required hon. Members to bring the matter forward in a different way. However, I am grateful for the Minister's response and I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 4

CONDITIONS FOR THE GRANT OF RIGHTS

Mr. Baker: I beg to move amendment No. 2, in page 2, line 42, at end insert

', but no variety which occurs naturally in the wild shall be the subject of a grant of plant breeders' rights.'.

Thank you for selecting my amendment, Mr Deputy Speaker.

This is a testing amendment, to which I hope the Minister will respond in a positive manner. There is anxiety about the fact that, with plant breeders' rights, it is possible to annex something that occurs naturally and claim it as a "discovery"—which is a word that is used in clause 4(6)—and thereby to market it and claim credits, and remuneration, for that.

The hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) mentioned a species or variety of apple. I can understand that sometimes a naturally occurring plant—fruit, vegetable or whatever—may be developed in such a way as to constitute something that has been added on and so would qualify for some sort of intellectual right. However, I am anxious to prevent it being possible for something that has always occurred naturally to be "discovered" and for benefit in financial terms to be accrued from that "discovery".

There is a dangerous precedent, which I hope that the Minister will address, regarding relations between the north and the south. If this principle were written into the Bill, something that has been growing for a very long time, to the benefit of farmers in the third world in particular, might be "discovered" and written into legislation in Europe. If that were the case, that could be to the detriment of those who were perhaps, dare I say it, simple farmers in the third world, and to the benefit of those who understood how laws worked and were able to exploit that knowledge for their own purposes.

That is the purpose of moving the amendment. I hope that the Minister can give an assurance that he understands that.

Mr. Rooker: I hope to satisfy the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) again.

If a breeder discovers a plant growing in the wild, he must carry out significant selection and re-crossing to establish distinctness, uniformity and—most important—stability. Wild plants invariably lack uniformity and stability, so it is not just a question of discovering something that is in the wild; the breeder must develop and do something about it. It is for that reason that clause 4(3) provides that:

"the person entitled to the grant of plant breeders' rights"

in respect of a wild plant

"is the person who . . . discovers and develops it"—

not just discovers it. I cannot accept the amendment because it is both unnecessary and unworkable.

The hon. Member for Daventry, who mentioned the apple in New Zealand, said that, having discovered the apple in the wild, it took that family 15 years to bring it to the market; it was not a question of picking something up and commercialising it.

I hope that, following that assurance, the hon. Member for Lewes will withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Baker: I will withdraw the amendment, but I draw to the Minister's attention the fact that, in clause 4(6), the word "discovery" is present and the word "develop" is not. That was why I moved the amendment. I am now happy to withdraw it.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 6

PROTECTED VARIETY

Mr. Paice: I beg to move amendment No. 9, page 3, line 21, leave out from 'above' to end of line 22.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 10, page 3, line 23, leave out from 'may' to end of line 24 and insert—

'impose reasonable conditions or limitations when giving authority for the purposes of subsection (1) above.'.

Mr. Paice: I do not wish to detain the Committee long, but the two amendments are specific.

I should like to press the Minister on why he has decided to insert in paragraph (h) of clause 6(1) what most of us would describe as a catch-all phrase. It is additional to the wording that appears in the European regulation, so we are seeing, not a direct transposition of European law into British law, but what, under the previous Government, would have been termed "gold plating"—the habit that some people have of taking a European regulation and not only transposing it into law but adding bells and whistles, with the often undesirable consequential effect of overburdening those whom it affects.

The purpose of amendment No. 9 is to persuade the Government that they do not need paragraph (h) because the EU regulation in the other items covers all the possible acts. If the Minister is convinced that he needs that catch-all phrase, I should be grateful if he would give the Committee some examples of the type of situation in which he envisages that the phrase will need to be used.

Amendment No. 10, which, like amendment No. 9, stands in my name and the names of my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash), would introduce a requirement that due regard be given to the balance of interests of those beyond the plant breeding industry, which would benefit the whole of the agri-food industry without restricting plant breeders' rights. It stems from the belief that some protection is required from the potential abuse of unrestricted rights, which is detrimental as it stands.

The potato crop is an example which has been mentioned many times. The current system allows for excessive marketing levies, from which breeders derive very little benefit. The purpose of the amendment is simply to introduce the element of reasonableness into breeders' rights.

I hope that the Minister responds positively to the two amendments, which we believe to be in the spirit of the Bill.

Mr. Rooker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) for the way in which he has spoken to the amendments. He has asked legitimate questions.

Regarding amendment No. 9, it is envisaged that paragraph 6(1)(h) may be used, for example, to extend the breeder's rights in respect of ornamentals to include their use for production of cut flowers. The 1991 convention permits contracting states to extend the breeder's rights to acts other than those specifically mentioned in it. I do not believe that anyone would argue about that.

However, we envisage that, in some circumstances, Ministers might use those powers to extend the breeder's right to the production and propagation of a variety for the purpose of producing cut flowers, foliage or fruit. Similar provisions exist in the Plant Varieties and Seeds Act 1964 and rights have been extended in a number of species. If, and only if, we are convinced that breeders of ornamentals and fruit varieties need a similar provision to enable them to protect their rights and obtain a reasonable return on them, we would consider using those powers for that purpose. That is why those powers are in the Bill. That is an example of the way in which we envisage using them, and the area in which we envisage doing so.

Some aspects of the Bill relate to the public interest, but we are legislating for relationships between two contracting parties, neither of whom are the Government: the grower and the seed specialist—the breeder. We can set ground rules on some issues, but the way in which they develop their arrangements is for them, not for the House.

I cannot accept amendment No. 10 because it goes further than any provisions in the EC sector or in other countries which protect their plant breeders' rights. If holders of rights impose conditions that are against the public interest, an application can be made to the controller of plant variety rights for a compulsory licence. No licences have been issued, but that is the level of the sanction against those who impose the wrong conditions. That sanction is necessary. If the holder of rights imposes conditions that are unacceptable to a person seeking a licence, but are not against the public interest, that is a matter for the parties concerned. It is not a matter for us to write into the Bill or for the Government to take a view about.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman realises that the Bill should not be amended in the way that he wishes.

Mr. Paice: I thank the Minister. On amendment No. 9, I appreciate his explanation of the need to allow for the addition of cut flowers and other items. I thought of another example earlier—gifts—but the Minister did not mention them. What would happen if some bright salesman decided to give away a tonne of seed with a tractor that he was selling? Perhaps the power would be invoked on such an occasion.

I was less enthused by the Minister's reply to amendment No. 10, but I understand what he says about it going much further than the European regulations. Therefore, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 7 and 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 9

FARM SAVED SEED

7.30 pm

Mr. Paice: I beg to move amendment No. 11, in page 5, line 20, at beginning insert—

'After 30th June 2001, where required to do so by a regulation made by the Council of the European Communities,'.

The Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 3, in page 6, line 4, leave out subsection (11).

Mr. Paice: The subject matter of the amendment was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) on Second Reading. The Minister responded by assuring the Committee that the purpose of giving him or his successors the right to remove the exemption at a date other than 30 June 2001 is purely to allow the date to be extended. That is precisely the intention behind the amendment, too.

If the Minister were in my position today, I am sure that he would point out that the Bill as published does not provide for such an extension. He would therefore be serving the interests of the House and the industry, and strengthening his own words, if he accepted the amendment, which merely includes in the Bill the undertaking that he gave earlier.

Mr. Cash: The Bill is much more complex and important than its innocuous title suggests, and it poses problems for constituents of mine and for the National Association of Agricultural Contractors. I am glad to note that my successor as the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney)—I now represent Stone—has already alluded to some of the questions that I want to raise. He appears to have some of the briefing papers that I have.

I abstained on Second Reading because of those difficulties. Indeed, I cannot accept the direction in which some of the provisions are headed. The issue that concerns my constituents and their association most has to do with subsection (6):

"The Ministers may by order provide that, on such date as may be specified in the order, subsection (5) above shall cease to have effect in relation to a variety so specified, or varieties of a species or group so specified."

[Mr. Cash]

The reference here to subsection (5) lies at the heart of the difficulty.

European Union plant breeders' rights gave holders rights over farm-saved seed which enabled them to charge a royalty on it. The United Kingdom breeders applied for the EU rights for varieties no older than the end of 1991, as first registered. Some difficult and protracted negotiations led eventually to agreements between the farmers, breeders and contractors on rates of royalty and collection methods. Those agreements were reached on the basis that varieties older than those applied for in the EU would not be royalty bearing. This, for the farmers and contractors, was an extremely important principle and was expected to last for the lifespan of the older varieties.

The arrangement partially maintains an ancient agricultural right. It also helps to maintain a fair market balance in terms of royalty rates; and it is the cornerstone of farmers' and contractors' acceptance of a radical devaluation of their rights.

Subsection (6) will destroy all this unless amended so as to apply only to varieties older than 1 January 1992. That is roughly in line with the practice under European Union rights. Contractors and farmers can live with some aspects of the Bill, but that provision worries them a great deal.

The Bill uses the term "sensibly lower" in relation to royalty rates—a curious bit of Euro-speak arrived at during the discussions on the trade agreements. The extension of rights to all the older varieties would make a mockery of those agreements, as the older varieties may not be "sensibly lower".

I am told that the problem could put the industry back a long way—unless the wording is amended. It is of far greater consequence than has yet been acknowledged. If the Government insist on the Bill in this form, it will cause considerable difficulties for the people who have written to me. I await the Minister's reply with interest.

Mr. Lansley: I want to take up again the point I made on Second Reading. The Minister has explained that the intention is to allow Ministers to extend the date from which the provisions can be applied, but that date should not be extended so far as to reduce the returns to plant breeders.

The timing of the introduction of the measure is all-important. Will the Minister refer again to the Government's intention, other things being equal, to introduce the provisions in the autumn of 2001?

Mr. Rooker: I hesitated before getting to my feet because I was wondering whether the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) was going to speak to amendment No. 3.

I understand the point made by the hon. Member for South–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice). Amendment No. 11 would add a date to the face of the Bill,

"where required to do so by a regulation made by the Council of the European Communities".

I have already offered the assurance that the exemption will not be withdrawn before 30 June 2001; but the Council regulation is quite separate from national law governing plant breeders rights, so it imposes no obligation on the UK. A decoupling may be required in the drafting of the amendment and this is neither the time nor the place to do it. Writing a date in the Bill would present problems because it would tie Ministers' hands if we had to change the date.

Getting space for primary legislation is not easy; the Bill has been in the queue for several years. That is the reality of parliamentary life. It is therefore essential that we can amend our national legislation through secondary legislation just as we can amend legislation that comes through the EC. The amendment couples the date and the regulations, whereas the two matters should be separate.

Mr. Cash: As the Minister says, the provision under subsection (6) can be made by order. Clause 45 provides for regulations and orders. The Bill empowers Ministers to make different provisions for different circumstances, and to make other adjustments to the arrangements in question. In the light of what I said about the difficulties that have been caused by the conjunction of subsections (5) and (6), would the Minister be prepared to consider at the very least making an order rectifying the question which the shadow Minister and I have raised?

Mr. Rooker: I am no expert and I have not been able to take advice, but I have been in the House long enough to know that the powers under clause 45, which are supplemental, incidental and transitionary provisions, would not come to that. This is a meaty issue, which cannot be dealt with by a technical drafting amendment.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) raised the issue from the other side of the coin. Let us suppose that the date were 2009. I do not wish to be quoted on that, although it may now have been taken down and used in evidence against me. Ministers do not intend to abuse that power, but would use it in the light of agreements with the industry. Following a meeting last week between the NFU and plant breeders, understandings were arrived at and will be complied with in the normal course of professional discourse. If they are not, the first to complain to Ministers will be hon. Members from both sides of the House. They will not be happy if that happens when people enter freely into commercial agreements with which the House does not wish to interfere.

There is a point of substance regarding the drafting of the amendments and I have no doubt that my words will be carefully dissected and probably looked at in another place.

Mr. Cash: Further to the point that the Minister has just made about statutory instruments, he seemed a little unsure about the application of orders. Clause 9(11) says:

"Ministers may by order amend this section as they think fit"—

I stress the words "as they think fit"—

"for the purpose of securing that it corresponds with the provisions for the time being of the law relating to Community plant variety rights about farm saved seed."

Will the Minister reconsider the point that he made, because my question relates directly to whether there is a power to revisit by order the matter to which I referred? Subsection (11) is unusual as it overrides many of the more general points, which I agree would normally apply to the making of orders.

Mr. Rooker: At the risk of repeating myself, order-making powers exist throughout the Bill and they

are quite specific. There is no general order-making power. Clause 9 contains two such powers. If it were accepted that we could do as we thought fit with one order-making power, the House would operate in that way and would not give Ministers those powers.

The order-making powers in the Bill are specific. The order-making power in subsection (6), which is the subject of the amendment, relates specifically to the date. We are reluctant to write a date into the Bill. I have given a commitment about the date and said that the exemption would not be withdrawn before 30 June 2001, so the amendment is unnecessary. I understand that Ministers can come and go, but I speak on behalf of the Government.

7.45 pm

Mr. Paice: I am grateful to the Minister for his response. He has a longer period of service in the House than I, but he would agree that no Minister wants to abuse the powers given to him in a Bill; that does not necessarily mean that, at some stage in the future, that would not happen. The amendment would ensure that it would not.

I appreciate the Minister's argument that the amendment may be defective because it couples two issues that should not be coupled, but I wonder whether I may push him. He made it clear that the Government have no intention of abandoning the exemption before 30 June 2001. Will he give an undertaking that he or his noble Friends will accept an amendment to that effect when the Bill goes to the other place if the two issues are decoupled? I am concerned that the Minister's undertaking should appear in the Bill by inserting that date.

Mr. Rooker: I undertake to discuss, well in advance of the Bill going to the other place, with my noble Friend Lord Donoughue, who will take the Bill through the other place, whether the Government can come up with an amendment likely to meet those points.

Mr. Cash: Would the Minister be kind enough to give the same consideration to the point that I made?

Mr. Rooker: Yes, of course.

Mr. Paice: In the light of that assurance, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 10 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 11

DURATION

Mr. Baker: I beg to move amendment No. 4, in page 6, line 32, leave out subsection (2).

I understand that I should not have called you Mr. Deputy Speaker, Sir Alan. I hope that you will forgive me. Some of us are still learning our ways in this place and the intricacies are many.

The Chairman: Order. I must say to the hon. Gentleman that we are all learning in this place.

Mr. Baker: That makes me feel better.

The amendment is to test the Minister on the reasons for including subsection (2). Subsection (1) clearly states for how long plant breeders' rights should have effect. Subsection (2) seems to undermine that by saying that those specific periods can be removed or extended but gives no maximum period. Earlier contributions to the debate showed that hon. Members on both sides of the House wanted, albeit with different interpretations, to ensure that plant breeders' and farmers' rights were balanced. Subsection (2) would weigh those rights in favour of plant breeders and away from farmers. I should be grateful for any clarification and assurance on that.

Mr. Rooker: Indeed, we are all learning. This is all new to me, too.

Clause 11, as the hon. Gentleman says, is an important clause which extends the period of protection for most trees and vines from 25 to 30 years, as compared with the 1964 Act, and from 20 to 25 years for many other species. Potatoes already enjoy 30 years protection, and a few minor ornamentals and tree species are protected for 25 years under the 1964 Act.

I cannot accept the amendment because it would prevent periods of rights being altered by secondary legislation, which is currently possible under the 1964 Act. As I said on Second Reading, 80 per cent. of the Bill is existing law. We are not introducing a great deal of new legislation. If we were doing so, the House would rightly want to proceed with the Bill in a different way.

It is unlikely that the powers in the clause would be used very often. The current periods of protection mirror those in the Council regulation. The periods specified in the clause bring the position in the United Kingdom into line with that in the European Community. Should they be changed by regulation by the Community, that would lead to considerable confusion and unfair competition, if the UK were unable to respond quickly to bring the periods of protection into line with our own legislation. We need the power to do that by secondary legislation.

Mr. Baker: I am grateful for the Minister's clarification and for his assurance that he would not—or rather, that the Government would not, as I doubt whether he will still be in the same role in 30 years' time, although he may be here perhaps in a different role—extend the time limits willy-nilly, and that the purpose of the clause is to accommodate European legislation. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 11 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 13

REMEDIES FOR INFRINGEMENT

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Lansley: I wanted to raise two matters, to which I referred briefly on Second Reading, and to seek the Minister's reply. First, I refer to provision for remedies for infringement in clause 13, which do not provide specifically for circumstances in which the holder of rights fails to receive remuneration from the user of farm-saved seed. Would it be possible for the provision

[Mr. Lansley]

also to be used by the holder of those rights to sue for proper remuneration? I understand that the clause could reflect provisions in the European regulation, articles 17 and 18.

Secondly, if persistent offenders take original seed and sell it in local markets or by other routes without giving proper return to the original holder of the rights in those varieties, could the clause be used to increase the penalties for such persistent offending?

Mr. Rooker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Because of our truncated arrangements, I am keen that no part of the Bill which any hon. Member wants to discuss gets hidden away. The fact that amendments have not been tabled is no reason not to ask questions about clauses. I could not answer every question on Second Reading.

The plant variety rights office has no role in enforcing rights. It would be incorrect to read such a role into the Bill. Clause 13 provides for holders of plant breeders' rights to take civil action in relation to infringement of their rights, including their rights in a dependent variety. It gives plant breeders the same remedies in law as are available to other owners of proprietary rights.

The Bill and the 1964 Act do not cover the case. It is a matter for arguments in the courts between two parties who happen to disagree. We do not seek to give new powers to the plant controller and the PVRO. Individuals who are aggrieved must go to court.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 13 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 14 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 15

Compulsory Licences

Mr. Paice: I beg to move amendment No. 12, in clause 15, page 7, line 29, leave out from the beginning to end of line 33 and insert—

'(a) that for the variety to which the application relates it is necessary in the public interest to do so, including the need to supply the market with material offering specified features, or to maintain the incentive for continued breeding of improved varieties,'.

The Minister will be aware that the amendment is a direct concern of the National Farmers Union. It was part of the NFU's original submission in response to the draft Bill under the previous Government. I shall press the Minister to tell the House why the Government have not accepted the NFU's view on the matter.

The amendment deals with compulsory licences, a system which the NFU believes to be inadequate and ineffective. I understand that a compulsory licence has never been granted. The limited grounds on which the controller may grant a compulsory licence as set out in the Bill are inadequate to accommodate the potato sector, for example, which has become extremely diverse in its requirements. The need to supply the market with specific varietal characteristics has become commonplace.

Moreover, the current system provides the applicant with no anonymity. That often deters an individual who is considering taking on the might of a large organisation. The NFU and the Opposition seek a mechanism within the Bill whereby application for a compulsory licence could be made by way of a corporate approach, which would provide some protection for the individual who was seeking a compulsory licence.

It is imperative not only that the Bill is aligned with European legislation, but that it is updated to reflect the changes that have occurred in this diverse industry since 1964. That is the basis of the amendment. I hope that the Minister will accept it and give us an assurance of the intent behind it.

Mr. Rooker: It is important that the point is considered in this place, as it will clearly be raised in the other place.

The amendment looks as though it was designed to widen the grounds of public interest, so that public interest is redefined to include the need to supply the market with material offering specific commercial features—for example, potatoes for chipping.

The amendment is unnecessary. Under the Bill, the controller is required to issue a compulsory licence if a variety is not available to the public at reasonable prices or is not widely distributed. The fact that a variety may have particular qualities would be one of the many factors that he would have to take into account in ensuring that the variety was available to the public at appropriate prices and in sufficient quantities to meet the needs of the market.

I accept that such a licence has never been issued under the compulsory system. I am not sure whether anyone has ever tried—and I am not inviting anyone to do so—to question the decisions that have been reached. I do not know whether applications for such licences have been refused, or whether the process of reaching that decision is questioned. There is a system available to anyone who feels aggrieved, whether that is the NFU, any of its members or anyone else.

I see no reason for anonymity. I said earlier that there was a widely accepted degree of openness about this exercise of government and public interest. I would not want to introduce any new aspect behind closed doors.

Mr. Paice: I thank the Minister, and beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 15 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 16

Selection and Registration of Names

Mr. Baker: I beg to move amendment No. 5, in clause 16, page 8, line 34, after subsection (1), insert—

'(1A) Any provision for the keeping of a register made under subsection 1(c) above shall include provision for such a register to be freely open for public inspection.'.

I shall press the Minister again on a freedom of information point. The purpose of the amendment is quite clear: to ensure, first, that any information relating to the keeping of a register is open and in the public domain; and, secondly, that anyone wishing to access the register is not subject to a substantial charge. The Minister may say that such information is already available in the public domain—in which case, he should not object to writing

the provision into the Bill. He accepted my earlier point about the need to ensure that arrangements are open and above board, and this is a constructive amendment which will help the Minister to achieve that aim.

8 pm

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Gentleman has got it the wrong way around: the Government would have to seek the approval of Parliament if we were to try to deprive anyone of information that is freely available. The present system seems to work adequately. The information to which the hon. Gentleman refers is freely available and is published both monthly and annually. All the lists are available. In addition, the register may be inspected at the plant variety rights office in Cambridge during normal office hours.

There is nothing closed about the register. Before the Government could close it, we would have to seek Parliament's approval. There is no need to write into the Bill procedures that are already followed willingly.

Mr. Baker: I hear the Minister's assurances that the register will remain open. My point—which has not been answered fully—is that, unless the provision is written into the Bill, there is nothing to stop a future Government removing the right of access without seeking the approval of Parliament. I explained earlier why I believe the issue of plant breeders' rights will become more sensitive in future, and I hold to that view. It would be convenient to withhold such information in those circumstances. Although there is no problem at present, we may face difficulties in the future. The amendment would ensure that every Government had as much backbone on this issue as the Minister has demonstrated. I shall withdraw the amendment in light of the Minister's personal expression from the Dispatch Box.

Mr. Rooker: I do not give personal commitments: I make commitments on behalf of the Government. I make that absolutely clear so that there is no misunderstanding in future. Consistent with the policy of open government followed by the previous Government, the information to which the hon. Gentleman refers is openly available. This Government plan to introduce a freedom of information Act: we are not in the business of denying access to information that is already available.

Mr. Baker: I hope that the Minister will not take it personally—or be insulted on behalf of the Government—if I retain my slight scepticism regarding this matter. He mentioned a freedom of information Act. I understand that it has been drafted, but it was not in the Queen's Speech and the Government have promised to introduce it some time in the future.

The Government have denied me other information by way of written parliamentary answers although it was provided by the previous Conservative Government. Therefore, I am not convinced that the Government are committed to freedom of information—although I hope to be proved wrong in due course and I shall be happy to accept such legislation. However, until such time as we can be sure that the Government are committed to freedom of information, it is right to push them on individual cases to ensure that information is available.

I accept that the Minister is speaking on behalf of the Government, who are committed to ensuring that information is available. However, I seek to ensure that future Governments will not be able to withdraw that information without seeking the approval of Parliament. My concern remains. I hope that the Minister will not dismiss it, but will perhaps reflect on the matter with his colleagues in another place. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 16 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 17 to 31 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 32

REFERENCE COLLECTIONS OF PLANT MATERIAL

Mr. Baker: I beg to move amendment No. 7, in page 14, line 7, leave out from 'Controller' to 'reference' and insert

'shall establish and maintain comprehensive'.

This amendment attempts to be constructive. Hon. Members have heard about the establishment that has opened in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South–East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) and about the importance that is placed upon collections. The Bill refers to a reference collection, but it does not required that it be maintained. It refers simply to the fact that:

"The Controller may establish and maintain reference collections".

The amendment seeks to emphasise the importance that the Liberal Democrats attach to the maintenance of such collections for future reference and possible future use. I hope that the Minister will accept that this is an important point and will respond positively.

Mr. Rooker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The operation of the plant breeders' rights system would not be practical in the absence of a comprehensive reference collection, which includes information about all United Kingdom protected varieties. That is the foundation without which the system would not work, and it must be maintained. It is not a question of "may" or "shall": the system would collapse and be ineffective without that reference collection.

As drafted, the amendment would require the controller to keep a list of information from around the world. That would prove impractical and unnecessarily expensive. International co-operation in plant variety testing under the UPOV umbrella includes facilities for the exchange of information and material between testing authorities. The establishment of a more extensive reference collection in the United Kingdom would result in unnecessary expense. All information is available and can be accessed by 32 member nations under the UPOV umbrella.

As I have said, the system would not work without a reference collection. It is not a matter of discretion: it is the foundation of the system.

Mr. Baker: I am grateful to the Minister for that response. I found it slightly confusing, but perhaps that is my fault. He seemed to say that a comprehensive collection exists, while resisting replacing "may" with "shall" on the basis that an extensive reference collection would cost too much money. However, I note that the Minister is committed to maintaining a comprehensive reference collection and, on that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 32 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 33 to 51 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New clause 2

REFERENCE OF CERTAIN APPLICATIONS TO THE MONOPOLIES AND MERGERS COMMISSION

'If it shall appear to the Ministers that any company making application for the grant of plant breeders' rights would, were the application to succeed, hold more than five per cent. of the market for the crop of which the variety which is the subject of the application is a variety, then that application shall stand referred to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission.'.—*[Mr. Baker.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Baker: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

I shall not rehearse the arguments that I advanced in my speech on Second Reading. The new clause is an attempt to highlight the importance that we attach to the direction in which the ownership or patenting of seeds is moving in this country and across the world. I cited figures earlier regarding the market penetration of Monsanto and other companies. Chemical companies are buying seed companies in large numbers. In the past, there was a natural division between seed and chemical companies that provided some protection because it diluted ownership within the agricultural sector. However, that is no longer the case and we are witnessing a concentration of ownership.

In those circumstances, individual companies are able to control significant sections of the market and adversely affect it to benefit themselves and to disadvantage farmers. The Minister has not had a chance to respond in detail to the serious issues about genetically modified material that are not in the Bill but are certainly germane to it. What happens will be significant in terms of plant breeders' and farmers' rights in future.

The Minister may say that the clause is unworkable, but I hope that he will not dismiss the real concerns of hon. Members and others about market penetration by genetic engineering chemical companies that are buying up seed companies. I hope that he will not be dismissive either about my argument that we need to have some control to ensure that transnational companies that are not answerable to the Government or anyone else in this country do not distort the market to their benefit and to others' disbenefit.

If the Minister wants to find a better way of achieving my objective, I shall be happy to hear of it. I have explained what I am trying to achieve by moving the clause, and I hope that the Minister will accept the spirit that lies behind it. I hope also that he accepts that it relates to an important point. For me, it is perhaps the most important point: the interface between the chemical companies and the seed companies. The issue cannot be ignored and I hope that the Minister will respond to it.

Mr. Rooker: I shall not dismiss what the hon. Gentleman has said—far from it, because he has raised an important matter. He has attached the new clause to the Bill, but it has much more significant implications for the Department of Trade and Industry because the hon. Gentleman is seeking to deal with monopolies and market power.

The hon. Gentleman may not like it, but the plant breeder is entitled to take commercial advantage of the varieties that he has bred, discovered or developed. The breeder or breeders may, and generally have, invested considerable sums, time, resources and technical expertise. If there is a problem and for some reason a breeder is holding back or acting, as it is thought, against the public interest, clause 15 contains powers for the controller to issue a compulsory licence. If anyone thinks that there is a real problem, such a licence can be issued if it is thought that it is in the public interest to do so. If a breeder abuses the dominant position of the marketplace, appropriate powers are available to the controller.

The hon. Gentleman is on a much wider issue, in many ways, than those with which we are dealing. I do not knock that because he is right to raise it on this occasion. The new clause, however, is not suitable for inclusion in the Bill for both the narrow and the wider reasons that I have advanced.

Mr. Baker: I am grateful to the Minister for accepting that I have raised an important matter. I fully accept that it fits into a much wider arena than the Bill covers, the Bill being quite narrowly drawn on a narrow subject. The Minister has accepted, I think, that the matter I have raised relates to the Bill in a way, and that is important.

As the hon. Member for South–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) said, no compulsory licence has ever been issued. That worries me somewhat. My other concern is that big business is involved. There is an attempt by certain companies to corner the market in a monopolistic way. Furthermore, as I understand it, there is pressure from the American authorities to ensure that licences and advances are introduced and take place as soon as possible without the precautionary principle being applied. It is surely important for the Government to protect the interests of all involved in this country so that they might stand up to the pressures that will follow. I accept, however, the Minister's argument. The new clause represents an attempt to raise a matter of principle. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Schedule 2

CONDITIONS FOR THE GRANT OF PLANT BREEDERS' RIGHTS

Mr. Baker: I beg to move amendment No. 8, in page 20, line 31, after 'application', insert—

'1A. The variety shall not be deemed to be distinct if, for the purposes of assessment of genetically modified organisms under United Kingdom or European Union law it has been deemed substantially equivalent to an existing variety.'.

The amendment represents an attempt to set out for the Minister what I perceive to be a potential weakness; I hope that he can convince me otherwise. It seems that plant breeders, especially transnational companies, argue clearly for distinctness as a reason for their having benefits under the Bill, but when they seek to convince the European Union that any plant or feedstuff that contains a genetically modified material should be available for

human consumption they argue that there is no distinctness and that the feedstuff or material is almost exactly a replica of something that occurs naturally. In some instances, the plant breeding industry will attempt to have it both ways by arguing sameness when trying to obtain EU permission and distinctness when, in future, trying to benefit from the Bill.

8.15 pm

Mr. Rooker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman again because he has raised an important issue. At the same time, I am not entirely clear what he seeks by way of the amendment. I shall not nit-pick about technical defectiveness, but I am unclear about the use of

"The variety shall not be deemed to be distinct".

Varieties are not deemed to be substantially equivalent in UK law or EU law: they are deemed to be either distinct or not. A technical protocol has been developed by UPOV, which is recognised internationally, for checking whether there is distinctiveness. It is true that a difference in one characteristic is sufficient to make a variety distinct, but the second variety may be dependent on the variety from which it is derived. In those circumstances, as I said on Second Reading, the holder of rights in the first variety will be able to claim an interest in the exploitation of the dependent variety.

The language set out in the amendment about deeming would be entirely impracticable when considering inclusion in the Bill. That illustrates why we need precision and clarity in the Bill. It is necessary to ensure that everyone knows where he or she stands—breeders, farmers and producers—so that there is no argument in law about deeming something to be substantially equivalent or distinct, bearing in mind the fact that there is a set of international protocols for testing the distinctiveness of plant varieties. The amendment would muddy the waters, if I may put it that way.

Mr. Baker: Perhaps I might apologise for my earlier defective amendments, if there were any. I feel rather more vindicated on this amendment because the words

"The variety shall not be deemed to be distinct"

are a replication, with the addition of the negative, of the first line of schedule 2. That being so, I assume that it is a reasonable form of words. I am grateful to the Public Bill Office for helping me with the rest of the amendment.

These matters are complicated and I accept that it is possible to move one pawn on the chess board and upset everything else. At the same time, I believe that it is possible for the plant breeder to have it both ways. Perhaps that is not a matter to be pursued now but perhaps the Minister will ensure that what the breeder benefits from in terms of the Bill will not be argued the other way round during another stage in the process. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule 2 agreed to.

Schedules 3 and 4 agreed to.

Bill reported, without amendment; read the Third time, and passed.

Solicitor-General (Salary)

8.19 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): I beg to move,

That the draft Solicitor General's Salary Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 12th June, be approved.

Before I say a few words about the order, I should like to welcome the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) to the Opposition Front Bench in his new capacity. I am sorry that this debate is such a relatively minor event for his debut, but I am sure that there will be many fuller opportunities to discuss House affairs.

The draft order is straightforward. It provides for an increase in the Solicitor-General's salary, so that it is at the same rate as that of the Lord Advocate. The House will know that, following the general election, the Solicitor-General was appointed as a Minister in the other place, which created an unusual situation that had not previously applied.

The House will also know that the Top Salaries Review Body and the Senior Salaries Review Board have published reports that have supported the traditional arrangement of paying the Solicitor-General the same salary as the Lord Advocate when both have been in the same House. As both are now in the other place, the Solicitor-General's salary needs to be increased so that it is once again the same as the Lord Advocate's. I do not think that this issue is contentious: it is a simple, straightforward amendment to bring that salary into line. I hope that it will meet with the approval of the House.

The order, if it is accepted this evening, will come into effect on 27 June this year, and will determine the salary of the Solicitor-General to be £78,072, which is exactly the same as the salary that was recommended for the Lord Advocate in the 1996 SSRB report. I hope that this simple measure will find favour with the House.

8.22 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I thank the right hon. Lady, the Leader of the House, for her gracious words of welcome. I immediately reassure her that, although the Opposition agonised long over this measure, we have finally come to the conclusion that it would be appropriate not to impede the passage of the order.

I expected the Government Benches to be full of disappointed lawyers. It is somewhat surprising that the Government could not find a lawyer in this House to occupy this position. When I glanced at Dod's, the invaluable guide to this new House of Commons, I saw that only two Members had registered an interest in jobs, both of whom are from the Government Benches but neither of whom is a lawyer. The only Member of the House of Commons who has indicated an interest in the law is the recently appointed Opposition Chief Whip.

I suppose that one can understand why the Government wanted to look elsewhere for their Solicitor-General. Perhaps this is a case of "it's not what you know, but who you know", although I fully accept that Lord Falconer is very learned in the law. I also accept that, in taking this salary, which may seem gargantuan to some of us, he is doubtless depriving himself of large fees.

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

The Government are clearly fortunate to have the services of such a learned lawyer. It would be churlish in the extreme for us to deny him this exceptionally modest salary. So I am delighted, in what the right hon. Lady referred to as my debut from the Dispatch Box, to welcome the order and urge the House to approve it.

8.24 pm

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North–East Fife): I should begin by declaring an interest, in that I once appeared unsuccessfully against the new Solicitor-General in a tribunal hearing before the Civil Aviation Authority. I should also declare a further interest. Such is the nature of the village of Scots law that it was his father, an eminent practising solicitor in Edinburgh, who gave me my first substantial case after being called to the bar in Scotland.

I therefore have compelling reasons for not adopting the churlish attitude that the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), making his debut, eschewed. I add my congratulations to those that have already been expressed. If I may respectfully say so, it was a matter of astonishment to many of us on the Liberal Democrat Benches that the hon. Gentleman did not have an equivalent responsibility at a much earlier date. I welcome him, and congratulate him warmly.

The Law Officers play a special role, because they give advice to the Government on legal matters affecting Government policy. Sometimes they have to stand aside from the Government. Some of us remember when Sir Patrick Mayhew, as Solicitor-General, had to threaten to put the Metropolitan police into 10 Downing street to get proper responses to inquiries that arose out of the Westland helicopter affair. On occasion, the Law Officers must exercise responsibilities in the public interest rather than on behalf of the Government.

It is right to say that there is great disappointment that there is no candidate from the House of Commons for the post of Solicitor-General for England and Wales. It is a double disappointment, because there is no candidate in the House of Commons to be Lord Advocate or Solicitor-General for Scotland.

The Scottish legal system is distinct and different, and, some would argue, in some respects a material improvement on the common law system of England and Wales. It is a civil law system: part of the exchange between Scottish scholars and the universities of Leiden and Utrecht in the middle ages. It is disappointing that it is not properly represented in this House. We are constantly told that this is a United Kingdom Parliament. It is a matter of great distress that hon. Members from Scotland do not have the opportunity to ask of a Law Officer from Scotland the questions that they are able to ask of Mr. Attorney.

My astonishment is, in some respects, based on my ignorance. I had not appreciated that it was being suggested that the lowly office of Solicitor-General is equivalent to the traditional and important office of Lord Advocate in Scotland. The Lord Advocate's office is of considerable age. About the time of the 1745 rebellion, the Lord Advocate, Duncan Forbes of Culloden, was, in effect, running Scotland. Before there were Secretaries of State for Scotland, the Lord Advocate was the Government's representative in Scotland.

I know things have changed a little, and the right hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar) is the Secretary of State for Scotland. I take nothing away from his great ability, charm and aptitude, but it is slightly galling that the great office of Lord Advocate should be compared to this inferior office, not least because the Lord Advocate's responsibilities are substantial. Every prosecution in Scotland runs in the name of the Lord Advocate, who is ultimately responsible for its conduct. That burden is not placed on the shoulders of the Solicitor-General for England and Wales.

I am not renowned for quarrelling with the Top Salaries Review Body, but in this particular regard I do not think that its analysis of the respective importance of these two jobs is accurate and justified.

Finally, although I never did national service, there used to be an observation that applied to people who did not enjoy their national service, to the effect that, if they could not take a joke, they should not have joined up. If, on 1 May, the Solicitor-General did not consider that the salary was good enough, he need not have accepted the appointment. *[Interruption.]* A sotto voce voice, which I shall not identify lest it embarrass the individual in his chambers later, says that the Solicitor-General nearly did not take the job. That says quite a lot about public service and the high motivation that Ministers require to serve the nation in either House of Parliament.

I should also say that it is pretty soon for the Solicitor-General to get a pay rise. If it is awarded on the basis of productivity, one would have to work a little longer in a factory or in Sainsbury's before receiving such a pay rise.

The Leader of the House said that the debate was not controversial. It may not be controversial, but it does not stand proper comparison with the dignity of the office of Lord Advocate in Scotland. I wish that it were possible to amend the order, as I certainly would have tabled an amendment recognising the remarkable responsibilities of the Lord Advocate and the fact that he is poorly remunerated compared with what now appears to be generous provision for the Solicitor-General for England and Wales.

8.30 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): At the outset of the remarks by the hon. and learned Member for North–East Fife (Mr. Campbell), I was persuaded not to join my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), whom I congratulate on his appointment to the Front Bench, in teasing the Labour party about its failure to find within a huge parliamentary party a suitable candidate for Solicitor-General.

First, the point had already been made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire; secondly, I risked being ticked off by the hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife, who is a learned member of the Scottish Bar and a fine advocate on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. However, the hon. and learned Gentleman then proceeded to make what I can only consider to be one of the most churlish speeches I have ever heard. I know that he was presumably speaking in jest and forensically, but it was an unhelpful speech because the Solicitor-General—in this House or in another place—needs to be properly remunerated.

I have to declare an interest, as I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the former Attorney-General and Solicitor-General at the same time. I consider that the Law

Officers in the House are underpaid. Perhaps I am echoing the views of Mr. David Pannick, one of the leading lights of the English Bar, who wrote an article in *The Times* recently suggesting that the Attorney-General should receive the same salary as a Lord Justice of Appeal—some £140,000 a year.

English and Scottish Law Officers carry immense burdens. Their offices are undervalued by us mere politicians. They perform duties on behalf of the Scottish and English and Welsh legal systems that go far beyond the usual public recognition that Ministers of their seniority normally expect. They do not appear every night on "Newsnight" and other exciting programmes, but that is probably because they are still working in the House or in their Department at the behest of the Government.

In my view, the Government—of whatever complexion—get very good value for money, and not just from the individual Law Officers and their staff—including the Attorney–General, the Solicitor-General and the Scottish Law Officers and their predecessors under the Conservative Government.

The debate allows me to suggest that the law and Parliament have become two separate countries. That is much to be regretted. The myth persists that the House of Commons is overstuffed with lawyers. The lawyers who are here—I include myself—may well be overstuffed, but sadly the legal profession is not over-represented in the House. It is to the detriment of the law and the House that the preponderance of legal talent in the Houses of Parliament now rests in the other place.

The whole point of tonight's debate is to draw attention to the sad separation between two great institutions. The election result underpins the assumption that there must be an enormous number of Labour-supporting lawyers in the solicitors' profession and at the Bar, so why are they not attracted to public service in the House of Commons? Pay must play some part. I do not agree with the hon. and learned Member for North–East Fife that those who are attracted into public service should not also be attracted by reasonable salaries.

People such as the Solicitor-General, the Attorney-General and their predecessors will have given up a great deal in financial terms in order to enter Parliament. They will have given up great and highly respectable practices at the Bar, for which they were properly remunerated. That must be a discouragement, as, by the time one attained sufficient seniority at the Bar to be worthy of consideration as a Law Officer, one would have to be a Queen's Counsel of some experience.

It is not in the interests of the House or the country to discourage well-qualified barristers from entering the House. I dare say that the difference between the £78,072 and £52,278 that we are now discussing will not begin to compensate the Solicitor-General for what he has given up.

The second reason why the law and the House have become two different countries relates to the lowering of public esteem for Members of Parliament. I shall not go in for a fascinating discussion about sleaze, as that would cause too much trouble on both sides of the House, but we as parliamentarians must recognise the lowering of public esteem. If the public do not think much of the House, why should members of the Bar wish to join it when they have a respectable occupation already?

Thirdly, there are fears at the Bar that, in future, Members of Parliament will be discouraged from continuing to practise at the Bar and that, either through exhortation or by changes in the rules of the House, it will become increasingly difficult for Members to maintain a practice or any other outside paid interest, so the House will shut itself off from a huge well of talent from which we should be able to draw law officers.

The hon. and learned Member for North–East Fife has already outlined the width, breadth and depth of the burden that falls upon the Lord Advocate, the Solicitor-General for Scotland, the Attorney-General and the Solicitor-General, so I will not repeat them. I hope that the House will by acclamation pass the order, not just because the current Solicitor-General deserves his salary, but because all Law Officers deserve it. I hope that it will send a message to those practising at the Scottish or English Bar who might otherwise be discouraged from entering politics, and to do so with a will to discharge public service.

8.38 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Like other Opposition Members, I was rather surprised that it was not possible to find a new Labour lawyer in the House to take up such a responsible position. My mind went back to an article in *The Independent* last September, which reported:

"New Labour is awash with lawyers, all waiting for their rewards".

It even said that the Society of Labour Lawyers had experienced a massive increase in membership. In just 12 months, it had increased to 800 members—an increase of two thirds in a single year. So why was Mr. Falconer, as he was at the time, selected?

The answer is a good and honourable one. Charles Falconer QC is an outstanding and gifted lawyer, and he has much in common with the Prime Minister. They have known each other since their schooldays, they have been friends for many years, they have great mutual professional respect, and they both send their children to fee-paying schools.

That is an important point to make when paying tribute to Lord Falconer, because he has taken an important salary cut. According to *The Times* on 8 May, in a decent year Lord Falconer could expect to make £500,000, which will fall to a derisory £78,000. Out of that, he will still have to find the £21,000 that he apparently spends sending his four children to private schools. I respect him greatly for taking a cut in his income of that magnitude, and my only sadness is that his children will not be joined at their private schools by the children of even poorer families, because of the abolition of the assisted places scheme.

I wish to draw attention to the gender discrimination that lies behind the treatment of Lord Falconer by the Government in comparison with the treatment of the new Minister for Women, the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock), with whom I have crossed swords in a previous existence outside the House. We are reliably informed by *The Guardian* that there are no fewer than 101 Labour women Members, but the Minister for Women was appointed six weeks after all the other Ministers, and will not receive a salary—not even a minimum wage. That contrasts badly with the treatment of Lord Falconer.

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

I shall conclude on a positive suggestion, arising from the bible of the old Labour party—*The Guardian*—which today pointed out that the Government will send no fewer than 50 of its Members of Parliament at a time away from Westminster to keep them out of trouble—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman has strayed dangerously far from the confines of the order. He seems to be unrepentant. I wish him to return swiftly to the terms of the order.

Dr. Lewis: I merely wish to suggest that similar consideration should be given, as we approve the order, to other people in less prestigious posts. They should perhaps be remunerated by a tithe from those of their colleagues who will not be serving in the House for part of the time.

8.42 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Given that the Opposition will not oppose the order, my comments are independent, but I hope that they will make a contribution to the decision. Perhaps they will inform future decisions, so that they will be better made. To my mind, there is something of the 18th century about the way that the new Government have approached their responsibilities. They have an 18th-century style majority, and they are now distributing the largesse of office among their friends.

On the one hand, we heard time and again before the general election attacks by the Labour party on the powers and privileges of another place, although the ordinary members of another place receive merely a subsistence allowance for their daily attendance. On the other hand, when the Government choose to magic their new Solicitor-General—who has not taken part in any election, and who does not face the duties to his electorate that we face to ours—into office, they brazenly ask the House to give him a salary nearly twice the size of that of an ordinary elected Member of this Chamber.

I expect howls of anguish from Labour Members, and, perhaps, given the earlier comments by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier), from some of my hon. Friends with a legal background, when they contemplate the huge fall in income that the Solicitor-General faces. Having accepted such a huge loss in his income, he would have shown a little more style if he had gone the whole way and accepted no income at all.

I believe it was said in the 18th century by one of the Treasury Ministers who served under Pelham and Walpole and other Prime Ministers of the day that, as Ministers of the Crown went to and from the House of Commons, they were passed their money "with a squeeze of the hand". Tonight, we will have a more open process to pass money to the Solicitor-General, and we must all be in favour of that. I believe it was an 18th-century Prime Minister who said that every man has his price, and some will say, perhaps mistakenly, that the price of the Solicitor-General is £78,000.

As my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) said, the order is a stark contrast with the treatment of the Government of their Minister for women. It says much for the latent chauvinism of the Government that they cannot see the irony in paying an unelected male nearly £80,000, when they refuse to pay an elected female any money for her ministerial duties. At this rate, I fear that the effect of the order will be single handedly to reverse the great process that occurred under the previous Conservative Government, by which the wage differential between men and women narrowed to merely 20 per cent.

Ms Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that his comments are gross hypocrisy, given that the Conservatives now have fewer women Members than before the election, while the Labour party has many more? In view of that fact, the comments by Opposition Members tonight are grossly hypocritical, and do them little credit.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am grateful that the hon. Lady has drawn attention to the fact that there are now many lady Labour Members. I appeal to them to join me in criticising the difference between the treatment of the Solicitor-General and the treatment of the Minister for women. I regret that there are fewer women Conservative Members, and I believe that, at the next election, the electorate will vote in many more women Conservatives—and, indeed, many more male Conservatives—so that we return to government. We all look forward to that.

The Government have shown discrimination in advancing this much appreciated and well-argued case for money for the Solicitor-General, when the treatment of the Minister for women has been so shabby. I am surprised that a Labour lady Member should criticise me for hypocrisy, when the actions of her party have been hypocritical in this instance.

8.48 pm

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I confined my earlier remarks to the principles involved in presenting the order—and, having heard a couple of Conservative Members speak, I think that that was wise of me. I do not want to spend much time on some of the points that have been raised, but let me say a word about what was described as "gender discrimination".

I do not think that Labour Members need any lectures from Conservatives, who obviously found it difficult to bring themselves to allow women candidates to stand in winnable seats. This year, especially, when we have seen the election of the largest number of women ever, the vast majority of them on our side of the House, we need no lectures from Opposition Members.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Would the Leader of the House care to comment on her own remarks in the context of women-only short lists? Might not those just possibly have had something to do with it?

Mrs. Taylor: I am not sure that that is relevant to the debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I shall answer the hon. Gentleman's question. He ought to know that most Labour women Members were not selected from all-women short lists. That is a matter of fact, for the record.

I can tell the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock), who has recently been appointed to a junior position as Minister for women, to assist the Secretary of State for Social Security in representing the

interests of women, needs no help from Opposition Members in defending her position. I am sure that she will enjoy debating such matters with them whenever they take an interest.

We heard some different views from Opposition Members about the exact level of salary appropriate for the Solicitor-General. I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn), who I understand was an investment banker before he entered the House, and may still be one, complaining that the suggested salary for the Solicitor-General was too high. I am not sure how that salary compares with the average salary of investment bankers, but it would be interesting to speculate what that might be.

It is also interesting that the hon. Gentleman claimed that my noble Friend would receive such a salary only because he was a friend of certain people in the Labour party, whereas the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) extolled his virtues. There is an interesting contradiction there.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Surely the Leader of the House has come to the heart of the matter now. I have not recently been an investment banker, but we know that many people are prepared to give up large salaries in order to serve their country as Members of Parliament. I do not think that one should single out the legal profession above all others.

Mrs. Taylor: Nor do I, but when we have an independent recommendation and the person appointed is, as the hon. and learned Member for Harborough said, well qualified to do the job, that person should be paid the rate independently recommended for that job by the SSRB. I feel strongly that, when the SSRB makes recommendations about the salaries of Members of Parliament and of individual Ministers, we should as a general principle act upon them. Otherwise, we would be saying that we as Members of the House should determine those salaries. I think that that would be dangerous.

Sir Patrick Cormack *indicated assent.*

Mrs. Taylor: I am glad that the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman agrees on that matter of principle. I assure him that those of us who have been here for several years know that interfering with the principle can only cause hon. Members on both sides of the House many difficulties.

The hon. and learned Member for North–East Fife (Mr. Campbell), who spoke for the Liberals, was uncharacteristically churlish—I must agree with the hon. and learned Member for Harborough that that is the appropriate word.

I speak as someone quite well versed in Scottish history, not only because I was born in Scotland but because my father was intent on ensuring that we all knew a good deal of Scottish history. None the less, I would not compare my knowledge of 1745 with that of the hon. and learned Gentleman, and I shall not go down the route that he suggested and debate whether the office of Solicitor-General is inferior to that of the Lord Advocate. However, I know that he accepts the principle that the SSRB makes recommendations that the House should accept.

It is on the basis of that principle that I recommend the order—not because the salary is one which I have plucked out of the air, or one which I think appropriate for the Solicitor-General, but because it is a matter of principle. The SSRB laid down a comparison, and I think it appropriate that we should stick to it as closely as possible.

I do not want to comment on the personality of the Solicitor-General. My earlier remarks were not personal, and the salary is being suggested because of the position, not because of the personality. None the less, I welcome the comments of the hon. and learned Member for Harborough, another Queen's counsel, who tells us that my noble Friend is so well qualified for the position.

Finally, I shall put Opposition Members in the picture on the increase before us. In one sense, it is an increase, but the salary of the Solicitor-General in the Conservative Administration was £82,189 on 1 April 1997, and on 2 May, the last day of the previous Government, it was £96,138. So although there is a technical increase for the present Solicitor-General because he is in another place, the actual sum paid is significantly lower than that paid to the previous Solicitor-General.

Mr. Garnier: The right hon. Lady will, of course, wish to clarify the fact that the previous Solicitor-General, Sir Derek Spencer, was also a Member of Parliament, so part of the figure she mentioned included his salary as such.

Mrs. Taylor: That is exactly the point, and that is why we had to introduce the order. The totality of the pay of the former Solicitor-General was significantly higher than the totality of the pay of the present Solicitor-General, because my noble Friend is in a different House. People who complain as if we were suddenly increasing the salary do not quite understand the situation, that the order arose directly out of the fact that the Solicitor-General is a member of another House, and directly out of the recommendation of the SSRB. I urge the House to accept it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Solicitor General's Salary Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 12th June, be approved.

Plymouth Ocean Projects Ltd.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mudie.]*

8.56 pm

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I wish to bring to the attention of the House a sad and disturbing story of a fine company based in my constituency, responsible for many jobs both locally and elsewhere in the United Kingdom, which has been dealt a devastating financial blow through no fault of its own, because of bureaucratic bungling and intransigence of the worst kind.

I shall begin with a summary. The company in question, Plymouth Ocean Projects Ltd., which trades as Fort Bovisand Underwater Centre, is owned by a constituent of mine, David Welsh. It entered into various arrangements in August 1996 with two colleges of further education to train students in diving. All was well until confusion arose between the Further Education Funding Council and the two colleges over whether such courses should be funded. By this time, the training was well in progress and the company carried on the training.

As a result of the confusion, which remains today, the company, although it has incurred all the overheads involved and has continued to train young people for their future careers, has not been paid since November 1996 and is threatened with insolvency. Job losses have already occurred through no fault of the company, and further job losses will occur unless the matter is resolved. I am glad to see the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells) in his place and I welcome him to his position. My argument tonight is that the Secretary of State has the power to intervene to direct the funding council to confirm that the courses should be funded. At the conclusion of my remarks, I will urge the Minister so to intervene.

It might be helpful if I flesh out the sequence of events in slightly more detail so that the House is aware of the full horror of the circumstances. Fort Bovisand Underwater Centre is the largest diving school in Europe. It has been established for 27 years and has a worldwide reputation for quality. It uses many subcontractors to carry out its training work and, in all, about 300 jobs are directly related to the existence of the company.

Last August, the company entered into a contractual arrangement with South Devon college, based in Torbay, and the Mid-Kent college, based in Chatham, to carry out a series of 10-week courses. The arrangement with South Devon college amounted to 50,000 units of training, and with the Kent college to 100,000 units of training—a substantial investment by the diving centre.

The courses began in August and all went well. Overheads were incurred, staff were paid and students were trained. In November and December 1996, problems began. In correspondence between the Further Education Funding Council and the two colleges, the council intimated that the courses might not be appropriate for funding and that funding might not be forthcoming.

The funding council's attitude was that it was for the principals of the colleges to decide whether to continue the courses. The colleges understandably took the view that they could not possibly pay for the courses unless they were reimbursed by the funding council, and they were not able to obtain funding from outside the funding council route. Therefore, a stalemate arose and it largely remains today.

The funding council relied on a circular from early 1996 in which, it said, it made it clear that such courses could no longer be funded. The colleges—in my view, rightly—said that the circular made nothing clear and that the situation was extremely confused. The confusion continued from November 1996. From that date, no more payments to the company were made, although it rightly continued to train young students and to honour its contracts. It continued to train to the same high standard. It is now owed the staggering sum of £562,000 as a result of the confusion and the lack of funding by the funding council. It is clear that the company is in a severe financial position.

My constituent began to lobby his then Member of Parliament and the then Government to intervene to break the logjam so that the company could continue to train students and be paid for it. He saw the then Minister in April 1997 and a great deal of correspondence took place. Legal advice was sought and much paperwork generated, but action came there none.

Since the general election, I have been in contact with the Department for Education and Employment, which was waiting for legal advice. I can tell the Minister that the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 seems to give him the power to intervene. Section 57(3) states:

"If the Secretary of State is satisfied, either upon complaint by any person interested or otherwise, that—

(a) a council, or

(b) the governing body of any institution within the further education sector,

have failed to discharge any duty imposed on them by or for the purposes of the Education Acts, he may make an order under this subsection."

The explanatory note to the section states:

"This section enables the Secretary of State to intervene, on the recommendation of the Further Education Funding Council, in the event of mismanagement of an institution. It also provides for intervention where there has been a failure—either by the Council, or by the governing body of an institution within the further education sector—to discharge a duty imposed upon them, or unreasonable action on the part of such a governing body."

I would say that that entitles the Minister to intervene and direct the funding council to confirm that the courses should be funded.

Ms Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Liverpool Dive school in my constituency is also affected? I want its situation to be given further consideration and I want a broader study of the operation of the Further Education Funding Council and its accountability.

Mr. Streeter: I am glad that the hon. Lady intervened. I am concerned to learn about the institution in her constituency. Many institutions and organisations throughout the country are awaiting funding because of these circumstances—many of them are subcontractors to Fort Bovisand Underwater Centre. She is right to call for a general review of the way in which the council carries out its duties in that regard.

We are still waiting for a definitive answer from the Department for Education and Employment. My constituent was told that we would have an answer on

17 June about the legal advice received by the Department, but sadly we are still awaiting the outcome. In the meantime, jobs have been and will continue to be lost. Indeed, more than 100 people have lost their jobs as a result of this bureaucratic bungling and the jobs of more than 100 more are on the line.

All that it would take for the matter to be resolved is for the funding council to confirm that the courses, which were entered into in good faith by all the parties, will be funded. It saddens me to think that people in secure jobs in the funding council in Coventry, who understand the threat to the livelihoods of more than 200 people—many of whom are my constituents—will not do more to be flexible, exercise discretion and common sense, do what is right and recognise that a genuine misunderstanding arose and that they can intervene and resolve matters.

I urge the funding council tonight, as I have urged it in correspondence, to reconsider and confirm that the courses will be funded, which would remove the logjam. I am asking the council not to create a precedent or to open the floodgates, but to recognise that an honest misunderstanding has arisen and that it has the ability to resolve the problem. My constituent, Mr. Welsh, is an innocent victim and he does not deserve to be treated in this way.

In conclusion, having dealt with the funding council for the past three months on this problem and felt the cold indifference of its response to date, I am not optimistic that it will change its mind. That is where I come to the Minister, whom I know to be a good-hearted man, even though he is Welsh. I urge him to act and to use his powers under the 1992 Act to direct the funding council to exercise common sense. At the stroke of a pen, he can resolve this issue. On behalf of my constituents, I urge him to do so.

9.7 pm

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): I will not keep the Minister or the House long.

The implications of this affair go much wider than Plymouth, or indeed Liverpool. In my constituency, I have a company called the Scubadoo diving centre. It has appealed to me and to my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth), who has taken a close interest in the matter as some of his constituents work for Scubadoo.

The implications of the matter seem to be extensive, ranging across a number of companies throughout the country. The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) is making noises from a sedentary position. Perhaps he is speculating why a diving centre is located in Croydon, some 50 or 60 miles from the sea. The answer is that, being a good, middle-class, prosperous, Tory-voting constituency, it contains people who want to go diving for recreation and so it seems a logical place for a diving school.

Through the Mid-Kent College of higher and further education, Scubadoo was a subcontractor to Plymouth Ocean Projects, providing services under contract. It describes itself as a satellite company. I am not sure what the contractual relationship is, but it was providing services in Plymouth for Mid-Kent college and expecting to be funded by the Further Education Funding Council. The company was astonished to be informed in March that funding had been withdrawn from August.

A small company is now owed about £19,000. There have been redundancies, and four divers' jobs are at risk. I hesitate to use the word bungle, but there has certainly been an administrative and bureaucratic oversight. We are talking about people's jobs and lives; it is not a question of people who should have known better than to enter into a contract: they were led to believe that they were serving the nation by providing educational facilities.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), I have always respected the Minister. I am delighted that he is on the Front Bench, as he has always behaved in a courteous and logical manner for and on behalf of his party. I hope that he will be able to say something constructive about a human situation that needs attention.

9.11 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): The hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) seemed somewhat bewildered by my interest in the debate. Like him, I have a satellite or subcontracting company, Rhino Divers, in my constituency, so I came as, I hope, a diligent Member of Parliament. I was also approached, fairly and appropriately, and asked to attend the debate, by the desperately anxious constituent of the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter).

I share hon. Members' deep concern and anxiety for people who have contracted in good faith to provide services and find that they are not being paid and are consequently financially embarrassed. The situation is clearly wholly unsatisfactory and shambolic. I look forward to what my hon. Friend the Minister has to say, but it seems to me that both the college and the Further Education Funding Council deserve serious criticism for the mess that they have created.

My hon. Friend the Minister will have the same difficulty that existed for the previous ministerial team. I understand that the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), expressed sympathy, but said that it was not a matter for her; however, that is not set in tablets of stone, so I look forward to what my hon. Friend will say. I know that he will do all that he can to help people who have been substantially disadvantaged, including those in both the substantive company to which the hon. Member for South-West Devon referred and the sub-contractors.

I fully endorse the concerns expressed by other hon. Members, but I am also here to say that it would be quite wrong for it be inferred that the new Labour Minister has a magic wand to wave that was not available to the previous Secretary of State.

Mr. Streeter: Party politics.

Mr. Mackinlay: The hon. Gentleman misunderstands me. I did not intend to introduce a note of partisanship. I wanted to say only that the matter had properly been referred to the previous Secretary of State, who was unable at that stage to help the hon. Gentleman's constituents. I wanted to flag it up that if the new Minister had found some way to overcome the impediments I would say hip hip hooray. I hope that the hon. Members for South-West Devon and for Croydon, South would join me.

[Mr. Mackinlay]

It should not be inferred that the problem is down to the Government, when they have demonstrably inherited it. The previous Secretary of State was not lacking in good will, but had difficulties that were conveyed to the constituent of the hon. Member for South–West Devon in a lengthy letter.

9.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Dr. Kim Howells): I thank the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) for giving me the opportunity to make several points on this issue and to set the record straight. I assure him and other hon. Members who have spoken that I intend that this mess should be cleared up as soon as possible. His advocacy for the jobs that are at stake was passionate. I shall certainly try to ensure that the jobs are preserved because they are to be found in some of the most difficult parts of the country in terms of unemployment. They are valuable and we need them.

Essentially, Mr. Welsh, managing director of Plymouth Ocean Projects, has made a complaint to the Secretary of State against the Further Education Funding Council. The complaint is being considered by the Department, and has been for some time, as the hon. Member for South-West Devon pointed out. It is being dealt with urgently but properly. Officials are not yet in a position to provide advice to the Secretary of State. I am very surprised about that because it is clear from letters from the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), that this thing has been dragging on. It should not have dragged on as long as it has. When officials give that advice, the Secretary of State will come to a decision and communicate it, with reasons, to both parties.

Let me recount the history of the complaint, which was made in the last days of the previous Government. Lord Henley, in one of his last actions as Minister, wrote to Sir Robert Gunn, chairman of the Further Education Funding Council—which I shall refer to as the FEFC, even though I hate such abbreviations—enclosing Mr. Welsh's complaint, identifying what seemed to be its main elements and seeking the council's views. Before turning to the complaint, it may be useful if I set out the legal framework for handling it.

Under section 57(3) of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992,

"If the Secretary of State is satisfied, either upon complaint by any person interested or otherwise, that—

i) a council, or

ii) the governing body of any institution within the further education sector,

have failed to discharge any duty imposed on them by or for the purposes of the Education Acts, he may make an order under this subsection".

The hon. Gentleman referred to that power, which is very important.

The following subsection states that

"an order under subsection (3) above shall declare the council or the governing body, as the case may be, to be in default in respect of that duty, and may give such directions for the purpose of enforcing the execution of that duty as appear to the Secretary of State to be expedient".

The Secretary of State also has the power under section 496 of the Education Act 1996 to prevent the funding council from acting unreasonably. This is important. That section states that

"if the Secretary of State is satisfied (either on a complaint by any person or otherwise) that a body to which this section applies have acted or are proposing to act unreasonably with respect to the exercise of any power conferred or the performance of any duty imposed by or under this Act, he may give such directions as to the exercise of the power or the performance of the duty as appear to him to be expedient".

It is obvious to me from the reply of the hon. Member for South-West Norfolk to an earlier letter from the constituent of hon. Member for South-West Devon that she did not consider it to be clear and expedient to act in that way. I want to explore how we might be able to act in that way.

When considering the exercise of any of these powers, the Secretary of State is acting in a quasi-judicial role in the general public interest, because public law may have been breached. The Secretary of State is not acting in the private interests of the complainants who have brought the matter to the Department's attention.

I should note that the meaning of the word "unreasonable" has been defined by the courts in the context of the exercise of the power. To fall within this expression, the conduct of the body must be conduct that no sensible body acting with due appreciation of its responsibilities would have decided to adopt. The interpretation of the word "unreasonable" imposed by the courts is therefore much more constrained than common usage implies. I assure the hon. Member for South–West Devon that I do not say that to make an excuse for the lack of resolution of the matter. To justify the Secretary of State's intervention, a decision has to be "unreasonable" to the point at which no sensible person in possession of the facts could possibly have reached it.

Mr. Welsh's complaint is that the Further Education Funding Council is refusing to fund training courses in diving that his company has provided, through a contract that he has with two FE colleges—Mid-Kent and South Devon. I am glad that the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) spoke on the matter. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Ms Ellman) have made it clear that the decision on this case goes much further than the decision on Fort Bovisand Underwater Centre, the company involved, and its associated companies.

Lord Henley identified four main elements to the complaint: first, that the FEFC should have accepted the open water and advanced open water courses as eligible for schedule 2(d) funding. Section 3(1) and schedule 2 to the Further and Higher Education Act define the courses for which the FEFC has a duty to secure adequacy of provision for part-time students aged 16 and over and full-time students aged 19 and over. Schedule 2(a) consists of courses leading to a vocational qualification approved by the Secretary of State. Schedule 2(d) consists of courses that prepare students for entry to courses in schedule 2(a). The FEFC is responsible for deciding which courses properly come under schedule 2(d). If I can translate that into English—it needs translation—open water and advanced open water training courses are intended to train people as scuba divers. I have discovered

that the word scuba does not come from some exotic Cuban drink, but means self-contained underwater breathing apparatus.

Mr. Mackinlay: I knew that.

Dr. Howells: My hon. Friend may have known that, but I did not.

The instructor manual of the Professional Association of Diving Instructors says that the open water diver course enables the student to engage in

"recreational open water diving without direct or indirect supervision".

The same manual says that the advanced open water diver course provides the

"novice diver with a structured, well-supervised means to gain additional experience".

Diving courses are arranged in the form of a ladder, with an individual needing to succeed at one level before passing to the next. Several diving courses are included in schedule 2(a). The highest rung of the ladder in schedule 2(a) is divemaster. There are three training courses below this level: in reverse order, rescue diver, advanced open water diver, and open water diver. The FEFC accepts that rescue diver, as covered by schedule 2(d), prepares the individual for the next level, divemaster, which is in schedule 2(a). It does not accept that open water diver and advanced open water diver courses should fall within schedule 2(d).

I have described that first element in some detail to provide the background to the other elements of the complaint identified by Lord Henley. The second element is that the FEFC should have accepted the opinions of the college principals involved that the courses were eligible for funding. This bears on the system in place for determining eligibility. The third element is that the FEFC did not make its decisions sufficiently clear, sufficiently well known or sufficiently early. This bears on the way in which the FEFC communicated its views to the sector. The fourth element is that the FEFC did not take action, even though it was aware of colleges' plans to include such courses. This bears on the system of communication between colleges and the FEFC.

I have outlined the complaint. What has happened since? The FEFC has replied to Lord Henley's letter, rejecting the four elements of the complaint in some detail. Departmental officials are considering the matter. In doing so, the FEFC has been asked for clarification on certain points, and the advice of counsel has been taken. In the light of that advice, officials have written to the FEFC seeking its further comments.

Departmental officials and our legal advisers have been aware of the urgency with which this matter should be pursued and they are even more aware of it today. However, the important thing is that it should be dealt with properly. Ministers are being kept informed of progress and are content that the matter is being dealt properly. It should be dealt with now and it is being dealt with now. Counsel advises that it should be dealt with as speedily as the nature of the complaint allows, but it is a complicated issue. We do not think that it would helpful or appropriate for the advice that we have received from counsel to be made public at this point.

Throughout, departmental officials have kept Mr. Welsh informed. We will continue to do so. Officials have also reminded him that he must take his own advice about the merit of pursuing alternative courses of action, in particular, pursuing the colleges in question in court—after all, it is with them that he has the contractual arrangement. Mr. Welsh has pursued this matter with energy and vigour and is in regular written and telephone contact with the Department. He has been kept fully informed of progress and, as I am sure the hon. Member for South–West Devon knows, conversations with Mr. Welsh have been many and there has been a full exchange of information.

I repeat that we are dealing with the matter urgently, but properly. I will certainly interest myself closely in the case and want to assure myself that the matter is being handled with all due speed. However, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will consider the complaint only on the basis of advice from officials and that advice will not be offered until it is soundly based. Mr. Welsh will be kept informed of developments.

I give the hon. Member for South–West Devon an undertaking that these matters are proceeding and that they will proceed more quickly. I understand the passion with which he addressed the issue; these jobs are important. I am shocked at what appear to be several instances of a lack of communication and of coherent interaction between the FEFC and the colleges in question. I am more than a little shocked by the way in which these matters generally are inspected and monitored. This is one of several cases that show that there should be much more careful monitoring of what contracts are allowed and of the interpretation and understanding of the legislation involved.

I believe that we can resolve this case. It must be resolved quickly. We have instructed departmental officials to get on with that job and I assure the hon. Member for South-West Devon that we will not relax until resolution has been reached.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes past Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 25 June 1997

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Conduct of Elections

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Jane Kennedy.]*

9.34 am

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): I imagine that on 1 May this year all parliamentary candidates were united in similar feelings. Labour candidates went to the count that evening in the hope that the opinion polls were correct and the expectation that the Labour party would at long last be forming the Government. Candidates from what are now the main Opposition parties had the opposite feelings.

It was not always thus, of course. In 1983, you in your previous role, Madam Speaker, and I went to our respective counts in the town of West Bromwich hoping that the opinion polls were wrong. I hoped that I would be able to hang on against the trend and you hoped that your majority would endure in the way that it had in previous years. So all of us as candidates have similar emotions. If my arithmetic is correct, 3,591 of us shared those emotions on election night on 1 May this year.

The vast majority of those 3,500 candidates stood under their respective party label. Some stood proudly as independents. Some might be regarded as eccentric, although I suppose that the House could argue that one or two of us who stood under party labels could be regarded in the same light. Some candidates had particular axes to grind. The grinding of axes is not unheard of during parliamentary elections, although axe grinders are not conspicuously successful when the votes are added up.

I want to set aside the hopes and ambitions of most of the candidates on 1 May and draw the attention of the House to the conduct of elections. I wish to put some serious matters before you and the House, Madam Speaker. I recognise that electoral fraud was raised in this Parliament, on 21 May, by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore). In that debate he dealt exclusively with events in his constituency.

A man called Terry Betts referred to himself in the general election as the "New Labour" candidate. That person had no connection with the Labour party and the description on the ballot paper was, in the opinion of my hon. Friend, deliberately designed to mislead. Similar misleading descriptions were used in many other constituencies by a variety of candidates, in an attempt to pretend that they represented something different from what they did in reality.

Not only candidates from my party were the victims of deception on 1 May. On 18 April—the day after nominations for the general election closed—representatives of all three major political parties appeared at the High Court of Justice before the honourable Justice Longmore, pleading that there was a threatened breach of section 115(2)(b) of the Representation of the People Act 1983, in that there was an intent or threat to impede the free exercise of the franchise by means of a fraudulent device or contrivance. The alleged contrivance was that the defendant in each of the cases was telling an untruth about himself in the description in his nomination paper.

The first case that morning involved the then Solicitor-General, the Conservative candidate in Brighton, Pavilion constituency, who was opposed by a man named Huggett, who styled himself on his nomination paper as the "Official Conservative candidate". The second case also involved a Conservative, a former Member of Parliament and a Minister in the previous Government. He faced in the Clwyd, West constituency an opponent who called himself Rod Richard. The Conservative candidate's name was Rod Richards. His opponent described himself as "The Conservatory party candidate".

The third case involved the prospective candidates for Winchester, who were challenged by the same Mr. Huggett who was standing for election to the Brighton, Pavilion seat. In Winchester he described himself as "Top Liberal Democrat for Parliament"—whatever that may be—"a Liberal Democrat Challenge".

The Labour party was also represented before Mr. Justice Longmore.

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): You have mentioned my constituency and the case of Mr. Huggett. Are you aware that he stood as the "Liberal Democrat Top choice for Parliament"? Are you also aware that we sought out five of the 10 people who had signed his nomination paper and that three of them were prepared to meet the returning officer to claim that they were misled and tricked into signing it? Perhaps you could pick up on that in your speech, because powers must be introduced to overcome that problem.

Madam Speaker: Order. I should just like to remind hon. Members to speak through the Chair.

Mr. Snape: I understand why the hon. Gentleman sought to intervene now; he had the courtesy to let me know that he is involved in a separate court action this morning about the Winchester constituency and will have to leave the Chamber before the debate is concluded.

I was unaware of all the circumstances surrounding Mr. Huggett, but the hon. Gentleman's remarks underline the concern that we should all feel at the fact that the democratic process is being subverted by characters who have no intention to stand for Parliament, which is everyone's right, but want to mislead the electorate deliberately.

The Labour party was also invited to appear before Mr. Justice Longmore on 18 April, the day after nominations closed, because my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman), faced a challenge from, among others, a Mr. William Johnson Smith who described himself as "New Labour". I understand that Mr. Johnson Smith is the son of a distinguished Conservative Member of the House. Afterwards he claimed that he stood under that title for a lark. It is not for me to tell Conservative Members how

[Mr. Snape]

they should bring up their children, but I hope that most of them would not approve of their children behaving in that manner.

The examples that I have cited reveal the lengths that some people will go to, to try to mislead the electorate deliberately. I do not believe that any of us would wish to prevent the likes of Screaming Lord Sutch from standing for election on behalf of the Monster Raving Loony party. Over the years, I have acted as minder to various Labour candidates across the midlands and I have had the pleasure of meeting David Sutch on quite a few occasions. He puts up his deposit; organises a few gigs in the constituency in which he is standing; and brings a little joy and happiness to what are normally fairly serious proceedings. Good luck to him.

I would not wish to stop some eccentric characters similar to those who were around in my youth from exercising their right to stand. All of us of a certain age in the House will remember Wing-Commander Bill Boakes, who pedalled his Heath-Robinsonian contraption around various constituencies as he fought by-election after by-election. He described himself as the road safety, public safety, white resident candidate, or something along those lines. He was never successful, but at least he brought a touch of gaiety to the nation.

The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) fought a serious campaign, but I can remember that he made his victory speech with a 6 ft 5 in transvestite standing in the background with a birdcage on his head. Some hon. Members might feel that such characters bring the parliamentary process into disrepute, but that person paid his money and took his choice, as did the electors. I do not object to such characters popping up at election time for reasons best known to themselves.

During the election, there were no fewer than 19 constituencies in which the Labour party name was misused by candidates. In six cases, the misleading description "New Labour" was used—*[Interruption.]* I realise from the reaction of some of my hon. Friends that that might have been the case in more than six constituencies. I had better be careful—I was referring to such a description being used fraudulently, but that will not satisfy some of the humorists in the Chamber. Most of my hon. Friends will know what I mean, but I had better abandon that potentially embarrassing topic.

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): Can the hon. Gentleman tell us how many names were on the ballot paper for the constituency of Hartlepool?

Mr. Snape: I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman must tear himself away from the pleasures of Kensington and Chelsea and make his way down the Corridor to the Library, where that information will be readily provided.

Mr. Clark: It is relevant.

Mr. Snape: I am not sure whether that question is relevant to the debate, but given the right hon. Gentleman's distinguished record inside and outside the House, should he feel that it is, I am sure that he will seek to catch your eye later, Madam Speaker.

I should like to refer specifically to the constituency adjacent to mine, West Bromwich, West, which has been represented with such distinction by you, Madam Speaker, for many years. The House will be aware that nominations to stand in the election closed on Thursday 17 April at 5 pm. About 48 hours before that deadline, the west midlands Labour party received information that a candidate would stand in the West Bromwich, West constituency describing himself as "New Labour".

On two occasions before the deadline for nominations, my election agent rang the election office at the council house, Oldbury, in the borough of Sandwell, to ask whether he could have sight of or details on any nominations submitted for the West Bromwich, West constituency and for the four Sandwell boroughs. That request was refused, apparently on the instructions of the acting returning officer and chief executive, Mr. Nigel Summers.

It was only after nominations closed that the information was published—indeed, it was first published in one of the local newspapers. We then learned that one of your opponents at the election, Madam Speaker, was describing himself as "New Labour—Time for Change". That person is not and, as far as I am aware, has never been a member of the Labour party, new or otherwise.

Given that injunctions had already been sought on the following day concerning various other constituencies and we were wrongly denied prior information about that opponent, the regional Labour party was unable to take any form of legal action. As a result of that blatantly misleading description, that candidate received more than 8,000 votes. Without betraying any confidences or transgressing the Official Secrets Act, I can inform the House that there were also literally hundreds of spoilt ballot papers from electors who had erroneously voted twice—both for you, Madam Speaker, and for that "New Labour" candidate, the imposter.

I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House will agree that such conduct is becoming ever more common. In two other constituencies, North-East Bedfordshire and Halifax, candidates who had changed their name by deed poll to that of the defending Member attempted to stand. Had legal action not been taken, electors in those constituencies would have been faced with two candidates called Nicholas Lyell and two candidates called Alice Mahon.

As the second Alice Mahon was a male, it is difficult to imagine that that candidate was doing anything other than attempting to deceive the electors of that constituency. I understand that the returning officer in Halifax declined to refuse that nomination on the ground that he claimed that there was a male pop singer around in the 1960s by the name of Alice Cooper. I note that some of my hon. Friends nod in agreement. They are obviously more trendy than I am—at least, they were in the 1960s.

Mr. Terry Lewis (Worsley): Perhaps we are older.

Mr. Snape: I shall settle for that description. My hon. Friends might well remember Alice Cooper—the nearest I can get is the song "A Boy Named Sue"—but that name did not arise from the nomination procedures before 1 May.

My hon. Friend the Minister will be aware that, where information is available, action can be taken by any of the political parties to try to prevent an abuse of the

democratic process. I am most concerned that in West Bromwich, West, we were denied even that elementary right and, although I have since written to the chief executive, I do not know why information regarding the nature of nomination papers before nominations closed—information that was readily available elsewhere—was denied us there.

I assure you, Madam Speaker, that had that information, which should have been available, been given to us, the Labour party in the west midlands would have taken prompt legal action. I can say that because I chaired the regional campaign committee during the election; when such cases arose, there was regular contact between regional officers and Labour party headquarters to see what action could be taken. As far as I am concerned, action would have been taken in your constituency, Madam Speaker, regardless of the fact that you and I have been political colleagues for many years and regardless of any Speaker's former political affiliation. The question whether any Speaker should be opposed is one for the political parties and I hope that hon. Members on both sides will agree that, if any Speaker is opposed, it should be based on fairness, not on attempted misleading fraud.

My hon. Friend the Minister will also be aware that there is even less protection against such misrepresentation in local elections than in a parliamentary contest. A number of unitary and county council elections were also held on 1 May this year, but is my hon. Friend aware that, in the new unitary authority of Bracknell, no fewer than four candidates who described themselves as "New Labour", but who had no connection whatever with the Labour party, appeared on the ballot paper?

Those candidates so split the Labour vote that the Bracknell Conservative party achieved overall political control, thus rendering any legal challenge—had one been possible—impossible. Legally, there is nothing that can be done, although the unfairness of such an abuse of the electoral procedure is all too obvious. I should tell Conservative Members that, although their party might have benefited in Bracknell, in other parts of the country and especially in the parliamentary elections they, too, were penalised by such action.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Is my hon. Friend aware that it is not only a question of past malpractice? When Scottish and Welsh Assemblies are established and if, as I hope, we move to a regional list system for the European Parliament, the question of the correct description of political parties will become even more important and pressing.

Mr. Snape: Although I cannot join my hon. Friend in willingly going along with a list system—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am not alone on Government Benches in being a founder member of the first-past-the-post system. Although it is not, strictly speaking, a matter for this debate, I have to tell my hon. Friend that I remain so committed. However, whatever the electoral system in future, my hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the likelihood of abuse. Given the fact that Scottish and Welsh devolution will bring more elections to both countries, the issue has to be sorted out sooner rather than later.

I do not underestimate the difficulty inherent in attempting to change the law, but I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will agree that something has to be done—and done quickly—to prevent candidates from deliberately misdescribing themselves and using political party titles to which they have no right. None of us would object to the descriptions "Independent Labour", "Independent Conservative" or "Independent Liberal". Such descriptions make it quite clear that the candidate, while having some sympathy with a specific political party, is standing as a candidate in his or her own right; but I hope that action will be taken against those who deliberately attempt to mislead.

In the earlier debate, the Minister who replied mentioned the use of party logos on ballot papers. Such procedures do not seem to cause great problems elsewhere in the world; a change in the law to protect party logos and a strengthening of the Representation of the People Act 1983—perhaps to provide for a specific offence of using a description deliberately intended to mislead—might help to stop future problems.

The time is long overdue for a detailed inquiry into the registration of political names and parties in order to prevent deliberate abuse of the democratic processes. I have deliberately tried to raise the matter in a non-partisan way and I hope that hon. Members from the other parties will agree that democracy is important enough for all of us to defend, especially when an attempt is made to subvert that democracy in your constituency, Madam Speaker, and in many other constituencies throughout the United Kingdom.

9.55 am

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) for initiating the debate, and I am privileged to have an opportunity to make a brief contribution.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue in a notably non-partisan way, and that is entirely as it should be. All parties and, more important, the electors stand to lose when episodes of the sort he described occur, whether wholesale or on a limited scale in individual constituencies.

One of the most notorious examples affecting my party and those who sought to support it during the most recent elections to the European Parliament was the case of my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders). He lost his seat because of a deliberate attempt by another candidate to deceive the electors by using the title "Literal Democrat". Efforts to gain redress through the existing procedures of the Representation of the People Act were wholly unsuccessful.

Following that incident, and throughout the previous Parliament, all-party discussions with the then Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), endeavoured to produce a proposal. The Lord Chancellor of the day, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, was also involved in those discussions. However, we got nowhere, and I am not sure that that was because no perfectly satisfactory proposals were put forward. I had a strong sense that the discussions were not progressed with determination, deliberation or any recognition of the seriousness of the issue.

The debate gives rise to wider questions, and wider solutions might be canvassed on the conduct of elections. My right hon. and hon. Friends would favour the establishment of an independent electoral commission.

[Mr. Robert Maclennan]

The regulation of elections is not a suitable matter to be handled by a Secretary of State and a Department. It is more appropriate that such matters should be handled by an independent body that is responsible to Parliament, as recommended by the Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government as long ago as 1991, in its report on the conduct of elections.

The commission would bring together the expertise of Home Office officials, the personnel of the boundary commission and those responsible for local authority electoral administration. Such a commission could be responsible for electoral administration, boundary revisions, monitoring of election expenses and the allocation of broadcasting time for all elections and referendums. To my mind, none of those matters is adequately dealt with at present. This is a short debate and I would not wish to expatiate on those topics, but I wish them all to be properly monitored and openly discussed, and ultimately decided on by Parliament as a whole.

I wish to ask the Minister a question about an issue wider than that touched on by the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East. Before the election, the Labour party, in its manifesto, expressed its intention to refer the issue of electoral funding, and especially the moneys that are made available to parties from sources other than the state, to the Nolan commission. I understood that to be Labour party policy before the election, but since then we have heard nothing about it.

I understand that the Nolan commission is appointed to sit until next spring; if it is to do that job, it should be charged with doing so quite soon. I hope that the Minister can tell us whether Nolan will be charged with that important question, for it is highly unsatisfactory that, at present, attempts are made effectively to buy parliamentary support.

There is a huge discrepancy between the amounts that political parties spend. Apparently, such expenditure does not always succeed in its objects. I suspect that, in the recent general election campaign, the amount spent by the Conservative party, which is widely rumoured to have been about £40 million—perhaps the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Dr. Mawhinney) can enlighten us—did not give value for money. However, I would not wish to enter into the merits of the ways in which the matter should be handled. That matter, including the extent of state funding for parliamentary elections, would be a proper issue for investigation by the Nolan commission, and all political parties might wish to give evidence on it.

The Liberal Democrats would support an element of state funding and some control limiting national expenditure on elections. As things stand, the rules are obviously being breached, not only nationally, but locally. Widespread telephone canvassing of constituencies is conducted from central locations to ensure the return of local candidates. Much that is done is difficult to track, but outside existing law. There is an urgent need to tackle that problem if the issue of expenditure on conduct of elections is not further to bring the process into disrepute.

Electoral registration has been mentioned on previous occasions by Labour Members. The present system is highly unsatisfactory. There are very substantial inaccuracies in the electoral registers. In 1991, the Hansard Society estimated that electoral registers were 16 per cent. inaccurate by the time that they expired. Not only are there inaccuracies in the registers as compiled, but some names are missing.

Treasury figures show that, in 1996, 14.7 per cent. of the population was missing from registers; in 1983, the figure was 2.3 per cent. Between 1986 and 1994, the percentage of the population on the registers fell from a bad 81.6 per cent. to an appalling 75.9 per cent., and nearly a quarter of those who should have been able to vote for the first time at the recent general election were not registered to do so.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): It would be interesting to conduct research to discover how many people were missing from the registers at the recent general election, and the extent of the inaccuracies that developed between mid-February, when the new registers started to operate, and the election date. Already, by 1 May, many people had moved and people had died. A host of problems had entered the registers in that short time. It would be interesting to have that information in addition to the Hansard Society information—the 16 per cent. figure—which is about 10 years old.

Mr. Maclennan: I agree, and I hope that in this short debate the hon. Gentleman will take the opportunity of developing the point. Obviously, we should have an accurate rolling register. That would be a suitable matter for the electoral commission that I recommended to embark on as soon as possible. It would help if we had the Government's acceptance of the principle of a rolling register in the life of this Parliament—even if, understandably, they were not able to say now how they proposed to bring that about.

Liberal Democrats also attach importance to the constitutional matter of the triggering of elections. The power of the Crown—or the power that is exercised in the name of the Crown, by royal prerogative—to call elections is inappropriate and highly anomalous in a modern democracy. It is time seriously to contemplate fixed-term Parliaments. We advocate fixed-term Parliaments of four years. We think it inappropriate that, in the political race, one competitor should fire the starting gun of an election, and we advocate that, as part of the agenda for reform, the new Government should seriously consider that proposal.

In our view, the issue of misleading descriptions on nomination papers, on which the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East—who spoke so eloquently—focused, is a matter of urgent importance. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten), with whose position we all sympathise at this time and who is unable to be in the Chamber now because of the pressures of his situation and a current court case, faced a candidate described as the "Liberal Democrat Top choice for Parliament". No doubt that description was designed to deceive, although I cannot say whether it had an effect on the outcome. It is unsatisfactory that such an element can be introduced into a debate, and it is important to emphasise that the sufferers are not only candidates but electors, who above all should be clear about their true choices.

One proposal to emerge from the all-party discussions was to enable reference to be made to a judge in chambers as soon as nominations were received, by any party who

considered that the description of a candidate was misleading. The case would be heard as a matter of priority. I remain of the view that that is a practical proposition. The Home Office and the Lord Chancellor's Department should have been able to come up with a more compelling response to the proposal.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): At the last election in Totnes, a candidate stood as the "Local Conservative". He was both local and a paid-up member of the Conservative party. In other words, he was standing for what he was. Perhaps that poses a greater difficulty than a candidate's intentions. If someone intends to deceive, that is one thing; if his intention is to stand for what he is, that is surely quite another.

Mr. Maclennan: Parties must determine whether a candidate is entitled to present himself as an official candidate, and there ought to be some sign whether he enjoys that entitlement on the ballot paper. My proposed electoral commission should be able to deal with such matters—but we do not want to wait for a final solution. The problem is relatively straightforward.

It may be difficult to judge intentions to deceive, but I remind the House of what happened at Hillhead. My noble Friend Lord Jenkins stood as a candidate there, and someone styling himself Roy Jenkins appeared on the ballot paper ahead of my noble Friend's name. There can be little doubt that the whole exercise was designed to pull the wool over the electors' eyes. What is required is speedy recourse to the courts.

What really counts is the will of the Government. There are doubtless several ways in which the problem could be tackled.

Brief allusion has been made to the possibility of registration of parties. That will become of great importance in the context of the Scottish and Welsh Parliament and Assembly if they are established under legislation following the referendums. I hope that the arguments that will be deployed then will be seen to have equal force in respect of elections to this House and the European Parliament. Registration is almost certainly the longer-term solution, and it would be interesting to hear the Government's thinking on it. It would certainly represent a course of action that would command the support of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

10.13 am

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): I support what the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) has said. Like him, I had a bogus candidate standing against me who sought to deceive the electors by calling himself the "Loyal Conservative", as opposed to the official Conservative. Like the hon. Gentleman, too, I distinguish between two types of bogus candidate—those seeking to deplete the number of votes given to the official candidate and those seeking publicity.

The hon. Gentleman used the famous example of the Monster Raving Loony party. What he omitted to say was that, for the £500 deposit that they put up, those people get about £8,000—worth of free postage and an enormous amount of invaluable free publicity. If they happen to be in the entertainment business, putting on gigs, that will boost their audiences and put a great deal of money in their pockets.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I have thought it a good idea before now to bring this matter before the House. I followed with great interest the debate initiated by the hon. Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore), who faced a "Loyal Labour" party candidate who took 2,500 of his votes. It was said in that debate that the candidate did not set foot outside his house but picked up all those votes by virtue of his description and position on the ballot paper.

That was some slight comfort to me, because the so-called Loyal Conservative in my constituency picked up 3,000-odd votes. He also chose the prime Conservative bits of the constituency and deluged them with propaganda—to the extent that people living there thought that I had done a runner and that the official candidate had changed. That was reflected in the number of spoilt ballot papers; people did not know whom to vote for, or whether I was dead or alive—

Mr. Snape: If the hon. Lady is trying to tell us that the bogus candidate out-publicised her, I can only say that he must be a remarkable character.

Mrs. Gorman: I shall take that as a compliment.

I see that the press are always here waiting to pounce on our peccadillos, which reminds me that there was a time in my colourful past when I stood as an independent candidate. In 1974, my platform was "Less government, less taxes and more choice". Like most of my colleagues, therefore, I like to claim that I was a forerunner of the Thatcher revolution.

I have been to discuss this matter with the Minister concerned—whom I thank for his courtesy—the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth). He was extremely accommodating and sympathetic, and assured me that the Government take the matter seriously and are contemplating legislation that may deal with it. I compliment the Government on that. Bogus candidates seem to multiply at national and local elections.

The £50 deposit was introduced in 1918 under the Representation of the People Act. Incidentally, that Act also enfranchised women. I offer that by way of a nice little reminder of the not-too-distant past. The deposit was introduced because bogus candidates were reaching saturation point. As the deposit becomes less significant financially, so the number of candidates will always increase. Some people may think £500 a lot of money these days, but it is peanuts compared with £50 in 1918—that was a very great deal of money then. Even into the 1980s, as many as 17 candidates, most of them bogus, stood in constituencies such as Bermondesy and Chesterfield. Although each one may pick up only a few hundred votes, together they add up to a great many.

Another problem that we face is the difficulty of actually confronting bogus candidates. As the hon. Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch said, his challenger did not set foot outside his front door, and there was no reason to believe that anyone was canvassing in the area. So there needs to be a time lag between the handing in of nomination papers and final registration. There must be enough time to let people to get to court—a process which itself is fraught with difficulties.

[Mrs. Gorman]

The obvious parallel is the register of company names and trademarks. If the official names or titles, "Conservative" or "Labour", supplemented by "Tory" or "Socialist"—

Mr. Snape: Steady on.

Mrs. Gorman: That used to be the Government's policy, but I am no longer sure. They seem to have become pseudo-Conservatives, so perhaps they should register that as well.

A registered company can challenge people who use its name. A classic case is that of Harrods, which often finds that stores, little cafés or even boot sales open up and call themselves Harrods. The company then goes to court and has that stopped.

I congratulate the Government on taking this matter seriously, and the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East on bringing it to the attention of the House. I trust that legislation will be introduced speedily, because local councils experience exactly the same problem with candidates. Where money is no object or the deposit is low—in the case of local councils there may be no deposit—there is no real deterrent to nutters and spoilers seeking to subvert the course of justice.

Mr. Steen: Does my hon. Friend agree that the problem is not bogus candidates but genuine candidates masquerading under a bogus title? The problem is not that they should not stand—that is their democratic right—but how they describe themselves. I foresee a tremendously big court case every time one challenges such people as to whether they are describing themselves correctly.

Mrs. Gorman: My hon. Friend makes a strong point. In his case, someone described himself as a Conservative and considered himself to be local, so that was difficult.

I have yet to learn of any legislation that solved every aspect of every problem. Nevertheless, by and large there are two options: either the deposit is pushed up to the point where people are deterred—that would be difficult because the amount of free publicity and postage is enormous, with £8,000 postage allowance in an average-sized constituency—or we devise a system like that which exists in the commercial world to protect a company's official name. We could then protect the official and, to all intents and purposes, real names of the official parties standing at elections.

10.22 am

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate, initiated so interestingly and eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape). I come simply to tell a story and then make a proposal.

The story is of someone who was challenged by a candidate describing himself as "New Labour" at the general election. It is arguable whether someone describing himself as a "Loyal Conservative" and standing against the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) was seeking to mislead the electorate or to contribute to the democratic process, but in my case, to have a candidate standing as "New Labour" against me is a deep affront. As in the case of the hon. Lady, I had no time to do anything about it. When the gentleman in question stood some four or five elections ago, he managed to secure 19 votes; having decided to describe himself as "New Labour", he managed to secure 1,615 votes and an outcome that produced 573 spoilt ballot papers.

The candidate enjoyed the fact that his name was Mr. Hurley. We realised afterwards that we had foolishly spent most of the election morning saying over the loud speaker, "Vote Labour. Vote early", which did not help our cause a great deal. Once we discovered what had happened, we took out newspaper advertisements to tell people that there was only one real article and that they should not be confused by substitutes. The candidate availed himself of free post at great public expense, much to the distress of postmen and postwomen who had to deliver bogus material to the electorate.

As ever, my name, suffering from the W factor, appeared at the bottom of the ballot paper, while he and other candidates were way up there. It turned out that we were taking people to vote who had voted for him and not for me. One old lady whom we had taken to vote memorably came out saying, "These 'New Labour' candidates are very good. I am glad that we are going to get them in." In a constituency that has been substantially reorganised as a result of boundary changes, I am known less well in some parts than in others, so that is an additional factor.

That entirely bogus candidate deliberately sought to mislead the electorate and put out material through the free post proclaiming his support for Tony Blair and new Labour and seeking to capitalise on the way the wind was blowing. I see the temptation of doing that. I could understand if Conservative candidates at the last election would also have liked to describe themselves as "New Labour".

When we came to the count, that gentleman, whom I had never met up to that point, told me absurdly that the returning officer had invited him to describe himself as "New Labour"—a ludicrous suggestion. When he made his little speech after the announcement of the result, he declared his undying support for me in particular and for the Labour party in general. On all the evidence, it was a deliberate attempt to mislead the electorate. As it happens, it did not matter, given that I was part of a landslide. However, the number of votes that he got was the size of my majority last time, so this is extremely serious.

Although the political system should not be monopolised by the existing players—we must have ease of entry for new people, whether they are quirky, eccentric independents or genuine new parties wanting to break in—we must get the balance right so that we do not allow deliberate misrepresentation to take place. My credentials on diversity are proved by the fact that, after the general election, our victory party and disco were held for us by the Monster Raving Loony Custard candidate, who is an expert on such matters.

This is not the time to rehearse the solutions to the problem. Some have been suggested, but there is not just one way to proceed. The matter must be approached seriously. We should regard the problem in the context of a range of other problems relating to the running of elections. We have paid some attention to the problem on and off over the years but have never seriously grasped

it. The Labour party had the Plant committee, which reported in 1993 and is known for what it said about electoral reforms. It is less well known for what it said about the conduct of elections, but it made a raft of reform proposals.

In the last Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), who has gone to graze in pastures new, introduced the Parliamentary Elections Bill incorporating some 30 recommendations arising from the Plant committee deliberations. It also picked up suggestions from the Hansard Society report some years earlier. I shall not go through the range of proposals, but they included voter registration, emergency voting, ensuring that disabled people have access to voting stations, the day on which votes take place, counting procedures, expenses, and a range of issues to do with the conduct of elections, which are currently deficient and need to be corrected.

As a party and as a Government, we are about to embark on a process of sustained political reform. Many of us celebrate that. As part of that process, one of the proposals that has emerged over the years and gained much force recently is for an electoral commission. I invite the Under–Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) to comment on that when he replies.

We must be serious about how we conduct elections. The present system is full of deficiencies and in some ways is a disgrace. I want to hear the Government say that they have plans to introduce proposals to set up an electoral commission, and that the commission will examine the issue of misleading candidates as part of its more general remit to make sure that the conduct of elections from now on meets with general democratic approval.

10.29 am

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart): This is the first time that I have spoken since you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have been in the Chair. I take the opportunity of welcoming a fellow Glasgow Member of Parliament to the Speaker's Chair—the first since Sir Myer Galpern was there. It is a great honour for the city that you have been appointed to the position.

I do not intend following the route of my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) and other hon. Members by discussing the lesser candidates in elections. It is an important issue and has been well aired, but other aspects of the conduct of elections need to be raised.

If I had any objection to other candidates, it was to those who called themselves pro-life candidates—not because I object to candidates putting forward pro-life views, but because the title "pro-life" implies that every other candidate is anti-life, which is a very unfair description.

I shall speak about the way in which elections are conducted, including the registration of electors. I do not know the position elsewhere, but in Glasgow at the last election there were grave concerns about the allocation of schools as polling stations, and other polling stations. Major changes were made.

In my constituency, residents of two high-rise blocks of flats—largely old-age pensioners—who in previous elections had voted at the local primary school 100 yards from their homes, suddenly found themselves transferred to a polling station a mile and a half away. That caused us considerable difficulties, but it caused them even greater difficulty. The greatest problem was caused to those voting for other parties, which had not laid on any means of getting them to the polls.

I am concerned also about the way in which the count was conducted in Glasgow. Again, I do not know the position elsewhere. In Glasgow, it was extremely slow and took far too long. All the counts for all the Glasgow seats had to be completed before any of the results were announced, which meant that it was 3.30 am before we could leave the hall where counting took place.

My main purpose in speaking, however, is to look to the future. Although I welcome the proposal for an electoral commission, one or two things must be done before such a commission is appointed. We are now in the electronic age, but we are not yet making full use of computers in the way in which we organise elections.

First, although the register is held in electronic form, the political parties generally get it in printed form. In some areas, one can get the electoral register on disc, but there is no statutory obligation for it to be provided in electronic form, or in an electronic form that can be easily read by the computers that most people have—the standard Windows 95 or other such formats.

Now that the register is in electronic form, it should be a rolling register. There is no reason why it should not be as up to date as possible when the election takes place. Anyone who can prove that he is living at a particular address should be included on the register at any point up to the calling of the election, if not right up to election day.

We must start cross-referencing the electoral register. We know when people are born, so we know when they reach the age of 18. If they do not appear on the electoral register then, there should be some check to find out what has happened to them in the meantime. We know that they go through the school system. Those records are increasingly held on computer by the same local authority that maintains the electoral register. I appreciate the potential dangers in terms of civil liberties, and we would have to be wary, but the task is not impossible.

My second and most important point is that, at the next general election, we should be voting electronically. People should go to the polling booth, receive a ballot paper, mark a cross on it by the candidate's name and, instead of putting the paper into the ballot box, should put it into a machine similar to that used for the national lottery. The vote will be recorded automatically and at 10 pm when the polling stations close, we will know at the press of a button the result of the election. The papers can still be placed in a ballot box after the vote has been recorded, so that a check can be carried out.

Electronic voting would save time, effort and in many cases the heartache of standing around in cold, dreary halls while people flip through papers and, especially when the result is close, repeat the count again and again. It is no longer necessary to do things in that way.

Initially, electronic voting will be conducted in much the same way as voting at present. People will go to the polling station, have their names checked off by a clerk and mark their ballot paper. I hope that all the polling stations in a constituency can be linked electronically and that the clerks can operate using a computer screen, so

[Mr. John Maxton]

that any voter in that constituency can vote at any polling station in the constituency, not necessarily at one to which he has been allocated, and his name will be recorded as having voted. There is a possible problem of fraud, but there is no reason why it should be any greater than at present, and fraud is not a major problem in Britain, as far as we know.

Electronic voting would make it easier to vote and simpler to obtain the result. Some people will still want a formal ceremony at which the results are announced. There is no reason why all the candidates should not assemble at 10.30 pm to hear the returning officer announce the results. Television cameras could still be present, and candidates could still make speeches. In the age of modern computer systems, it is absurd that we should have to wait for hour after hour while the votes are counted.

I ask my hon. Friend the Under–Secretary to consider the matter because action is needed now. We cannot wait until an electoral commission is established. If the commission is to consider electronic voting, it will want to conduct trials in limited areas. There is no reason why, even in the referendum in Scotland, the system could not be tried out in four or five polling stations to see whether it is feasible. It should certainly be tried at the next local elections and the next European elections, possibly in a full-scale trial. By the time of the next general election, an electronic voting system should be up and running. It will develop, so that it becomes faster and easier for future elections. I hope that the Government will examine the system and introduce it by the next general election.

10.39 am

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): The hon. Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) addressed the important issue of candidates' descriptions eloquently and in a very entertaining manner. Several other hon. Members underlined the importance of that issue, including my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) who made a powerful contribution.

We acknowledge that there are serious issues to be addressed in respect of candidates' descriptions, and my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary has met the Home Secretary to reflect on that matter. We shall consider it further—and in a non-partisan way—in the future.

10.40 am

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) on securing this important debate. I join the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison)—whom I welcome to his new position—in complimenting my hon. Friend on his speech and on the interesting way in which he described an important and difficult issue. Other hon. Members have also raised some concerns. I know that Madam Speaker will have listened to the beginning of the debate with great care and attention. As we have heard, she was involved in an incident during the election campaign.

I assure you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and Madam Speaker and all hon. Members who have contributed or listened to the debate that the Government take such matters very seriously and that we are actively examining ways of tackling them. I shall report to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on several issues that have been raised during the debate—including the interesting suggestions on ways in which votes might be registered, which deserve serious consideration.

On 1 May, more than 30 million people cast their votes in the general election. No other event involves the direct participation of so many people. Therefore, it is appropriate that we should take time to consider whether our elections are conducted effectively and efficiently. It is important to ensure that the electoral process does not allow people's wishes to be distorted.

I shall deal first with the issue on which my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East concentrated: misleading descriptions on candidate nomination forms and ballot papers. This is not the first time that the issue has been raised in the House since the election. In an Adjournment debate on 21 May, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore) described the problems that he had encountered in his constituency. I know that a significant number of other hon. Members have experienced various difficulties in that regard. For example, in the 1994 European elections, the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) was opposed by a candidate calling himself a "Literal Democrat". The hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) outlined the difficulties that she has faced, and I hope to return to those matters in a moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East referred to incidents that had occurred in council elections. He drew attention to the Bracknell council election, the outcome of which he alleged was affected materially. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) referred to a little old lady who was deceived when casting her vote. That is an unacceptable situation, and we shall address that problem seriously.

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): Until the late 1960s, party political descriptions did not appear on ballot papers. A candidate was described as a "farm labourer", "gentleman" or "gentleman retired". We could avoid attracting fringe candidates who do not have proper support, not by increasing the deposit, as the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) suggested, but by increasing the number of people who are required to nominate a candidate for election. The current figure is 10 nominees per candidate in parliamentary elections, but only two nominees are required in some council elections. There may be a case for increasing the figure to 1 per cent. of eligible voters, which would deter those candidates who do not have sufficient support but not those candidates with genuine conviction.

Mr. O'Brien: I suspect that that condition might also deter the eccentric candidates, whom we have agreed we would not wish to dissuade from standing in elections. Screaming Lord Sutch has become almost an institution in the British electoral system, and I do not think that any hon. Member would seek to dissuade him from putting his name forward. There are certain difficulties associated with increasing substantially the number of nominees required. I am not sure whether my hon. Friend also advocates removing candidates' descriptions from ballot papers. Those descriptions—so long as they are not misleading—often assist the voter.

Candidates who seek to confuse the voters deliberately and to garner votes that should properly go to another candidate are a menace. They threaten to undermine the democratic process, and the Government are determined to deal with them. The hon. Member for Billericay was opposed by a candidate who called himself a "Loyal Conservative". She and the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) referred to candidates who mislead the voters but who believe that their titles honestly reflect their politics. My initial reaction is that what is important is not the candidate's intention but the effect on the voter. Elections are about giving voters a choice—not about allowing candidates to use their preferred titles. We must consider whether the voters are likely to be deceived, even if that is not the candidate's intention.

Before outlining possible solutions to those problems, it might be helpful if I provide some background information. Descriptions on ballot and nomination papers were introduced in 1969 to address the problem of misdirection or attempted misdirection of the electorate. They have clearly not been as effective as we might have wished. The returns from the general election have still to be compiled, but I fear that the use of potentially misleading party names on ballot papers has increased from 1992. Fortunately, that spoiling tactic does not seem to have affected the election outcome in any constituency—my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East described how it affected a council election—but that does not detract from the seriousness of the problem. As a result of a deliberate deception, some people may have been misled and ended up voting in a way that they did not intend.

The provision that allows every candidate to include a description on his or her nomination paper is set out in the parliamentary election rules in schedule 1 to the Representation of the People Act 1983.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): The rules regarding nomination papers are explicit. However, those rules are often not applied when people fill in nomination papers, which may be signed without completing the details at the top. A simple solution to that problem, which does not require primary legislation, would be to have nomination papers signed in the presence of a justice of the peace in the same way as expenses are signed off after an election. That provision would apply only to parliamentary, and not local, elections.

The Minister might like to consider another solution that would not require primary legislation. At the close of nominations, the returning officer could draw a letter from a bag containing 26 letters of the alphabet, which would start the alphabet for the purposes of the ballot paper. That would prevent a pre-emptive spoiler from using his or her surname against a candidate whose surname began with the letter W, for example—or S in my case.

Mr. O'Brien: Both ideas are interesting and deserve consideration in the review that will obviously take place after the 1997 general election. In conjunction with other parties, we shall be considering what changes might need to be made. No doubt the hon. Gentleman's propositions can be fed into that process of full and proper review and consideration of the issues.

I return to nomination papers. No candidate is required to provide a description as such on the nomination paper. Where he or she does so, however, the description set out on the paper is automatically transferred, in the same terms, to the ballot paper. The description may not be obscene or racist or act as an incitement to crime. Beyond that, the rules provide only that the description must not exceed six words and must be sufficient, with the candidate's other particulars, to identify him or her.

I should now explain the responsibilities of acting returning officers. They have responsibility for the conduct of parliamentary elections in each constituency, but they do not have power to amend a candidate's nomination paper, and may reject a nomination only in very restricted circumstances: the circumstances are if the candidate is disqualified because he or she is currently serving a sentence of imprisonment or if the nomination paper is not as required by law and the paper is not subscribed in the due form.

The effect of the second part of the rules is that the acting returning officer can rule only on the validity of the nomination paper, not on the validity of the person's nomination. The reason for limiting the returning officer's authority is clear. Successive Governments have taken it as a first priority that acting returning officers should not be drawn into making decisions that might be considered political, or party political. The officers themselves do not want to be drawn into the political arena. In principle, I think we would all agree that that is right.

I listened with interest to what my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East said about information about spoiler candidates not being available. I cannot explain why the returning officer in Sandwell took the view that he did. I shall certainly draw the matter to the attention of the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), who usually deals with these matters in the Home Office. I am sure that the appropriate inquiries will be made.

Some possible solutions have been suggested, including some this morning, as to how we might approach these issues. Over the past couple of years, Home Office officials have had meetings with officials from the political parties to examine options for dealing with the use of misleading descriptions.

I shall consider the various other options before moving to that of registering political parties, which was raised by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan). One of the other options would be to increase the level of the deposit. The value of the deposit has fallen against other financial comparators, both since it was first introduced in 1918 and since it was revised in 1985. The evidence suggests, however, that an increase in the level of the deposit would not influence those individuals who deliberately set out to use misleading descriptions as spoilers. It would, however, seriously reduce the opportunity for fringe but genuine parties, such as the Green party, and those people who wish to stand independently of any party, to put up candidates in a general election.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East and others have said that there is no wish to discourage fringe candidates. We seek only to ensure that, when names are on the ballot, everyone who is voting recognises what they are and is not deceived into thinking that they are something that they are not.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East suggested increasing the number of people who nominate. I am not sure that there is any evidence that that would

[Mr. O'Brien]

act as a deterrent, other than to deter fringe candidates. In practice, spoiler candidates are likely to be able, if they have a misdescription on the nomination form, to garner higher numbers of attested signatures than the present requirement. Obviously, if we increased the number substantially, the difficulties for such candidates would increase. The price of doing that would be to deter the fringe parties. We are reluctant to do that.

Mrs. Gorman: Is the Minister aware that, in the United States, a candidate must secure several hundred names on the paper before he or she can stand? That does not seem to deter candidates or adversely affect the US electoral system.

Mr. O'Brien: I am not fully briefed on all the United States election practices. My recollection, however, of when I have been in the US at election time is that the rules are somewhat different in different states. There are, of course, particular rules for the presidential elections. There are various different types of ballot, including ballots for the primary elections. Different numbers of votes have to be achieved in different parties and in different states. There is a mixed system.

Although extremely rich individuals such as Ross Perot have managed to fund the raising of the number of nominations required, other fringe candidates seem to some extent to be deterred. I accept that there are some fringe parties and that all sorts of parties put up, but not to the same extent as in the UK. Increasing numbers is something to be considered, but I am not convinced at this stage that that is the way forward.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is nonsense that only 10 signatures are required on a ballot paper when someone is seeking to represent 70,000 people within a parliamentary constituency, whereas the same number of signatures is required to represent 2,000 people at parish council level? Surely the purpose of signatures is to demonstrate an acceptable level of community support.

Mr. O'Brien: The objective is to ensure that there are some people at least who want to nominate an individual. What should be regarded as a proper level of community support is a matter for debate. I suspect that each Member of this place is likely to have his or her own view on what that level of support should be. It is an issue to consider, but at this point I am not persuaded that merely increasing the number of attestors would remedy the mischief that we are seeking to address.

Another option is to introduce scope for nominations to be challenged in different ways. The approach is superficially attractive, but it would almost certainly require an increase in the statutory election timetable that determines the period between the issue of the writ and polling day. The advice of the Court Service, which would need to service any challenges, is that a period of at least five days might be required. The period would be greater if an appeal procedure were to be included, or if a judge determined that additional time should be allowed for the preparation of a defence or to introduce disputed evidence. A consequence of a flexible timetable could be that polls in some constituencies at a general election might not be held on the agreed polling day. That is something that we would, I think, view with concern.

Registering the names of political parties as types of trademark is another possibility. I understand that some of the major parties have already obtained trademark registration. The difficulty with this approach is that the Trade Marks Act 1994 provides protection only in the course of trade, and we are advised that political activity does not fall within the definition of an activity in the course of trade. Similar constraints limit the ability of passing off proposals and providing for parties to become companies guaranteed by law.

If we are to change current legislation, we might as well tackle the issue itself rather than try to mess about with trademark law or something else. Let us address the issue itself.

None of these options seems especially attractive or effective. That has led the Government to conclude, as the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East, said when responding to the debate on the issue last month, that the answer probably lies in a system of registration of political parties, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross said.

The principal problem with the use of party names as candidate descriptions is that the political parties are not recognised in electoral law. That means that there is no procedure by which a political party can register its name for electoral purposes, or prevent anyone from using its name, or a similar name, to confuse the electorate. A system of registration could help to overcome that by giving statutory recognition to political party names. It might then be possible to prevent attempts to pass off a person as a candidate of a recognised political party by using a description intended to deceive.

The Government are considering how best to take the issue of party registration forward. There are various difficulties and problems that we need to address. In discussion with other parties, we want to work on procedures to deal with the important issues that have been raised in the debate. We intend to deal with them, and we hope that we will be able in due course to proceed with a system of registration.

Pre-school Education

11 am

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): I am pleased to have this opportunity to introduce a short debate on a subject that is of great importance. I should at the start declare an interest, in that earlier this week my wife received an application form for a certificate of eligibility, so I have a significant family interest in this area of policy.

In recent weeks, the Government have introduced important changes to pre-school education policy. As they were achieved through administrative action rather than through additional legislation, I was glad that Madam Speaker felt able to agree to my request to debate the subject on the Floor of the House.

There will be a fair measure of common ground across the Chamber on objectives, especially on the desirability of expanding provision for pre-school education. There will also be disagreement about the best means of attaining those objectives. I want to put on record my regret at the Government's decision to press ahead with the abolition of the voucher scheme. I believe that the system of vouchers placed power in the hands of parents in individual families. My fear is that the system proposed by the Government will take power away from those parents and put it in the hands of local education authorities, which may or may not be responsive to the demands of parents living in their areas or to the different opportunities for pre-school education provided by the voluntary and private sectors.

I welcome the Government's stated commitment to the expansion of nursery education, and their recognition of the need for partnership between the agencies of local and central Government and the private and voluntary providers. I also welcome the fact that the new Government have decided to adopt Conservative policies on the inspection of pre-school institutions and on the notion of desirable learning outcomes. My concerns are about both the long term and the immediate future of pre-school education. In the time available, I should like to explore the legal basis of local education authority responsibilities, funding, admissions policy and the relationship between local education authorities and voluntary and private sector providers.

I shall first deal with the Government's statement of principles for the longer-term development of pre-school education: the longer term refers to 1998-99 onwards, so it starts in a relatively short time. In the Government's recent letter to chief education officers, their stated objective is that, by April 1999, every LEA should be able to offer a good-quality pre-school place to all parents who want it, and for that place to be available free of charge.

The first problem on which I want to probe the Government is the legal basis on which local education authorities will make such provision. LEAs do not currently have a statutory duty to provide pre-school education. Is it the Government's intention to amend the law in the education Bill that they have promised for later this Session? If so, are they of the view that LEAs should have a duty to provide pre-school education, or do they prefer a formula, such as a duty to secure provision? It is more than merely a matter of semantics, because it takes us into the realm of the partnership between the different providers and the extent of the power given to LEAs to pick and choose between providers in the private and voluntary sectors.

As I understand it, under the Government's proposals, the only private or voluntary institutions that will secure funding from the state for pre-school education will be those that have been approved by a local education authority, and which have been included on the LEA's list and published as part of its plan. What guarantees does the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Ms Morris), think the Government will be able to extract from local education authorities that they will always act fairly?

The statement of principle is in the Government's circular to chief education officers, and the desire for partnership is expressed, but there is no mention of detailed criteria against which the judgment of LEAs could be reviewed, or of sanctions that might be available against a local education authority that had acted arbitrarily and unfairly. It is not just a matter of political speculation: there have been concrete examples in recent years of LEAs, for doctrinaire reasons, pursuing what can be described only as a vendetta against particular voluntary or private institutions.

A case that ended up in court has been brought to my attention. Liverpool city council sought to reduce the number of children able to be admitted to the Monkton nursery on the ground that the school was in breach not of the statutory but of the recommended space standards published by the Department of Health. That decision was taken despite the school's proven track record and in defiance of the Department's own guidelines, which state:

"Where a facility has been running for a number of years and offering an acceptable standard of care to the children with which parents are satisfied, a local authority should not consider closing it down or reducing the number of places just because it falls below the recommended space standard."

That incident caused the school a great deal of hassle and upset and distress to staff and parents. The High Court case left the Labour council in Liverpool with a bill of about £120,000 in lawyers' fees, which probably would have been sufficient to build a brand new nursery in the city. It was a waste of public money to pursue narrow, dogmatic, political interests. I hope that when the Government consider in more detail their guidance to local education authorities and the wording of any legislation that they plan on this subject, they will examine carefully how to ensure that LEAs act fairly towards their partner institutions.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): This is an important matter. Does not my hon. Friend think it strange that, apart from the Minister, the Government Benches are deserted? Does not that send signals to the country about Labour's general attitude to this important matter?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman is making a speech, not an intervention.

Mr. Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a sound point, although I note that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson) is sitting on the Government Front Bench. He has long taken an interest in education, and has strong views on it—which, no doubt, is why he has been silenced by being sent to the Whips Office.

[Mr. Lidington]

My second point about the relationship between local education authorities and the private and voluntary sector concerns the proposal in the Government's circular that LEAs should have discretion to spend less than £366 per child per term when it comes to reimbursing private or voluntary providers for the costs that they have incurred in educating children. I am not sure what the justification for that is—especially given that, when the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Bill was going through the House, the Labour party criticised the then Government heavily on the basis of a fear that we might be prepared to allow less than £1,100 a year to be paid to voluntary pre-school and other such organisations when their usual fees were less than the value of the vouchers. That seems rather a quick U-turn, even for the Labour party under its present leadership.

Have the Government thought about the criteria that LEAs would have to consider when judging whether a cut in the reimbursement to a private or voluntary provider was justified? Could an LEA make an arbitrary decision, or could it be placed under an obligation not merely to direct the money to other such providers—I think that that is in the circular—but to use it specifically to provide training for pre-school leaders and others to bring their talents up to the standard that the Government expect, or, indeed, to put it towards capital investment to provide additional places? I should like to hear more detail about that from the Minister.

Mr. Tredinnick: I am listening with interest to what my hon. Friend is saying, but I must criticise him on one ground. He has not specified what we did in the previous Parliament, when we were in government. It is important to put on record the benefits that the Conservative Government managed to achieve for people through the pre-school voucher scheme, and it would be remiss of my hon. Friend to ignore those achievements.

Mr. Lidington: My hon. Friend is right. The Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Act 1996 set in train a considerable expansion in nursery and pre-school provision, in a way that was responsive to the individual needs of parents rather than the administrative and financial convenience of local authorities. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend must accept the reality that the present Government have chosen a different course. It is incumbent on us as an Opposition not only to do as my hon. Friend suggests, and remind the House of what we achieved when we were in office, but to probe the details of the proposals that the Government are presenting to the House and the country.

My next point concerns admissions and planning for pre-school provision. Under the arrangements proposed by the Government, local education authorities would be responsible for the provision of pre-school places, but would not control admissions in every maintained school within their boundaries. An LEA would not, for example, be able to insist on the provision of a given number of nursery places at a Church voluntary-aided school, although one assumes that most primary schools would want to attract the funds and provide the places.

Do the Government plan to give local authorities greater powers in law to control admissions? Is there a risk that an LEA would have power to impose an artificial limit on admissions to a popular nursery school or class in order to maintain the number of children attending an unpopular one? I hoped that we had escaped from that when the Conservative Government introduced open enrolment in the 1980s, and I now hope that we shall not return to such a policy.

Mr. Tredinnick: Has not the Conservative policy of open enrolment proved extremely popular, and will not any move that threatens it be viewed with disdain by many parents? Choice has become an important element in education, and many parents expect it. I hope that my hon. Friend will develop that argument.

Mr. Lidington: I agree. No doubt my hon. Friend will try to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so that he can make his points in more detail.

There is a particular problem in regard to out-of-area provision. Perhaps it is most obvious in places such as inner London, which contains a large number of LEAs that are close to each other, but it also exists in counties such as mine. Buckinghamshire is long and thin, and its arterial routes tend to run east-west across the county rather than north-south between the major towns. Many parents choose to take their children to a pre-school institution just across the county or borough boundary.

Having studied the Government's circular, I am not sure how they propose to deal with the problem. The circular seems to suggest that an LEA should consider adding to its list providers in neighbouring local authority areas that have taught pupils from that LEA, but I wonder whether that recommendation is enough. There still seems to be a risk that an LEA might, for its own financial reasons, try to restrict parental choice, and insist on including on its list only the institutions that fall within its boundaries.

That would be regrettable. Many mothers, for instance, might want to use a nursery near their workplace—which might be across a local authority boundary—rather than a nursery close to home but remote from work. A number of women with pre-school children work at Stoke Mandeville hospital in my constituency. It clearly makes sense for them to take their children to a nursery on site, rather than taking them somewhere else, going to work and then collecting them later after another car journey.

In their circular, the Government say that qualified teachers

"should be involved in all settings providing early years education".

I think that the Under-Secretary spoke about that when the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Bill was in Committee, and I hope that she will be able to explain what the Government mean by "involved" in this context. Are they suggesting that a qualified teacher should have to be present in every classroom where pre-school children are being taught? If that is the case, it would clearly present a problem for private and local authority day nurseries, for pre-school classes and for nursery classes in independent schools, which at present are not required to have a qualified teacher in the classroom all the time. I hope that the Government do not intend to try to squeeze those organisations out of existence.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's point about quality.

Is it more important to have qualified teachers teaching pre-school children than to have places made available? I should like the hon. Gentleman to address that quality issue.

Mr. Lidington: The key point is how we assess and monitor quality. Quality is not always ensured simply by having in the classroom someone who is seen as a qualified teacher. I do not wish to see places provided by means of a hypothetical conveyor belt, regardless of quality. The previous Government had it right, because we said that we would assess and inspect the quality of the education provided by the institutions and would base our judgment on that. Extra, inflexible rules about having a qualified teacher on the premises are unnecessary if that central principle, enforced through regular and professional inspections, is adhered to.

Many adults who may be doing a good job in pre-schools may want qualified teacher status but, because of family or other commitments, they cannot take the time to engage in a course. Perhaps some of them have followed other courses, which do not entitle them to qualified teacher status. However, they are doing a good job and it is for inspectors to decide whether the quality of an institution is up to scratch.

Mr. Willis: Would you say that it is essential for an A-level history student to have a qualified teacher, but that it is not necessary—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Under the procedure in the House, when an hon. Member uses the word "you", he is referring to the Chair.

Mr. Lidington: Qualified teacher status does not necessarily guarantee high-quality education. In independent schools in particular, many teachers who have not gone through teacher training courses teach well. I should prefer to leave such judgments to the heads and governors, subject always to regular and rigorous inspection to ensure quality.

My next point to the Minister relates to the Government's policy on child:staff ratios. In Committee on 13 February 1996 on the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Bill, Labour Members, including the Minister, voted for an amendment moved by the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), which would have provided a statutory maximum ratio of one member of staff to 13 children. Is that the Government's policy, or have they changed their views on ratios?

The single biggest concern that I have picked up from local authorities about the Government's longer-term ambitions relates to the funding of the scheme. We know neither the amount that the Government propose to spend nor the mechanism that they propose for the distribution of the money. When Labour was in opposition, it criticised the Conservative Administration for not spending enough and alleged that the £1,100 voucher would be insufficient to cover the costs of a pre-school place.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, who was then a shadow spokesman on education and who has now been banished to the post of assistant valet, said on 22 January 1996 at column 104 of the *Official Report* that £1,100 was not enough. The Secretary of State for Education and Employment, who was then the shadow spokesman on education, criticised the Conservative Government on their lack of provision for capital expenditure and on the lack of dedicated funds to train providers. That is recorded at column 44 of the *Official Report* on the same date. The Government's circular to chief education officers states that the cost of their proposals will be met "from existing funding".

We need to know more from the Government about whether they propose to divert money from elsewhere in the education budget to fund their proposed expansion, especially as they strongly argue that places should be provided free by April 1999 to every parent who wants such a place. I cannot see how that promise can be met, unless the Government are prepared to spend more on pre-school education, taking the money from other programmes, raising it by taxation or borrowing it as they think fit. Perhaps they are prepared to shoehorn pre-school children into extremely large classes, which would not provide the sort of education that we all want. As well as responding to that, I hope that the Minister will say whether the Government expect the money to be distributed to LEAs via the standard spending assessment or by some sort of specific grant.

I shall deal briefly with the Government's interim arrangements for 1997–98. I was somewhat amused to see that the certificates of eligibility are vouchers under another guise. It is hard to see how the Government's proposals will reduce administrative costs or bureaucracy, about which they criticised us so much. I have a couple of detailed points. I appreciate that LEAs do not have to have their plans ready until next week but, of course, they had to notify the Department by 16 June as to whether they intended to produce interim plans. How many LEAs have notified the Department that they intend to present an interim plan for 1997–98?

Secondly, there is the issue of the pupil-specific data, which the Government insist LEAs should provide. LEAs are being put under a duty to check individual parental claims for reimbursement, and the Department says that it will call for additional pupil-based data if it considers that necessary. That is considerably more cumbersome and bureaucratic than anything in the voucher scheme, which relied on checking providers. The Government's approach seems to expect LEAs to check individual families to make sure that they are not getting double subsidies, by having their children in a certificated or voucher-funded place one morning in a voluntary pre-school, and then putting them in LEA places in the second half of the week.

There is a particular problem in respect of cross-boundary places. I gather that the Data Protection Act 1988 stops the nursery administrative centre from giving a local education authority specific data about pupils being educated outside that LEA area. I wonder whether the Government have come up with a solution to that problem.

There is a shared commitment among hon. Members on both sides of the House to a further expansion of nursery education, building on the achievements of the previous Government. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), whom I am delighted to welcome to her new role on the Opposition Front Bench, will be forthright in seeking to develop

[Mr. Lidington]

Conservative party thinking on that issue, as on other matters of education policy. The commitment is to providing not just places, but places of high quality.

Many question marks remain against the Government's proposals. They owe the House and the country a much more detailed account of their intentions than they have provided so far. In particular, I am looking for considerable reassurance that the consequence of their changes will not be simply to transfer power away from families and back to town halls.

11.30 am

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I thank the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) for using this Adjournment debate to highlight the issue of the future of nursery education—or, as Liberal Democrats would prefer to call it, early-years education—and I apologise for wrongly addressing him before. I think that he would probably agree that it is one of the biggest issues facing the early part of this Parliament, and it is one on which the whole House could unite, provided that we get the right policies.

It is rewarding, if perhaps ironic, that, after 18 years of constant state education system reforms, the previous Government did not realise, until it was too late, the importance of early-years education. There was somehow a disbelief that, while examination performance was improving year by year, standards in numeracy and in literacy were falling and that a significant number of children were becoming alienated from the education system and indeed from society.

The previous Government did not seem to understand why that was so. The realisation that our education system needed not simply reform from the top downwards, but to be rebuilt from the bottom upwards, beginning with early-years education, sadly came too late. As a result, we have probably lost about 15 years of potential progress. Not only have many young people been disadvantaged, but the whole country is having to pay a price for that failure.

To be fair, 18 years ago, there was considerable scepticism about the value of early-years education or nursery education, but today there is almost universal acceptance of its value. The High/Scope research project by Schwinhart and Weikart in the United States of America demonstrated the significant cost benefits of early-years education. It meant less criminal damage and fewer court fees to pay, the payment of more taxes by better-educated citizens and the need for less remedial schooling, not to mention the enormous personal benefits in terms of the quality of life of the individuals concerned.

The dramatic conclusions of the evaluation of the 1992 key stage 1 national curriculum assessment project—the National Union of Teachers project—clearly demonstrate again the advantages, particularly to children from lower socio-economic groups, of having received good nursery or early-years education. Even the former Prime Minister was convinced that early-years education was important. At the Tory conference in 1994, he said:

"There are many views about nursery education. But my views are clear. I am in favour of it".

To be fair, the nursery voucher scheme was probably this country's first attempt at a universal early-years education system. That needs to be recognised, yet, despite the research findings, the scheme that is in place has done virtually nothing to meet the needs of the nation's three-year-olds and little to improve the service to our four-year-olds.

The system was universally condemned when it was announced. The then shadow Secretary of State called it "absolute nonsense" and a "convoluted administrative nightmare". The Liberal Democrat education spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), called it "a total con trick" and even the then Chairman of the Select Committee on Education, the former hon. Member for Crosby, Sir Malcolm Thornton, cast doubts, calling on the then Secretary of State to abandon the whole idea if the pilot scheme did not work.

The pilot scheme was a qualified failure, but, conveniently, it was expanded in time for the general election, with vouchers appearing on the electorate's doorsteps. The fact that the hon. Member for Aylesbury needed reminding of his Government's policy on the nursery voucher scheme is evidence that even he was slightly embarrassed by the whole process.

The scheme guaranteed not a nursery place to every child, but only the provision of a voucher to part-fund a place, should a place be available. For children in areas where there was little or no provision or where top-up fees were not available from parents, and for children in large rural areas such as the one that I represent, where children are sparsely located and where there was little existing provision, the voucher scheme delivered little. It remains what the present Secretary of State called it at the time—a bureaucratic nightmare—and it has caused tremendous stress to primary and infant schools, which have had to compete for voucher money to help to offset the costs of enlarged reception classes. In particular, it has disadvantaged schools that simply do not have room to provide for additional four-year-olds and that, inevitably, have lost children to other schools, so forcing unnecessary budget cuts and staff reductions.

Given the failure of the present scheme, the Government's commitment to replace it with an improved model and the overwhelming evidence that early-years education is a "price worth paying" to improve the quality of our education system, the whole House was entitled to expect a more considered response from the Government than the Secretary of State's letter to local education authorities on 22 May. Despite all the rhetoric and all the criticisms of the previous voucher scheme, what we have, in effect, is a new scheme that offers places to the same group of children, for the same number and length of sessions, and with the same budget—the same budget is exactly what the Secretary of State promised in his press release.

So what has changed? First, the paper transaction of the voucher has disappeared, and thank goodness for that. Secondly, there is now an expectation that a place will be provided for all four-year-olds and that is an important difference in the Government's proposals; there is not merely an entitlement to a voucher that people may or may not be able to spend, depending on where they live. Thirdly, I welcome the fact that provision will be organised through local education authorities. It was interesting to hear hon. Members talk about unfair treatment by LEAs of private institutions, when we remember how grossly unfairly LEAs have been treated in the past 18 years.

I do not want to be entirely negative about the Government's proposals. There is merit in the proposal to seek comprehensive development plans from LEAs for early-years education. Such a move would establish the principle of early-years education within the overall framework of state education. That is to be warmly welcomed. The Liberal Democrats will also actively support the Government's drive to ensure that all places are of good quality. We shall continue to support an active partnership between the maintained, the private and the voluntary sectors. Indeed, I compliment the previous Government on achieving that with their nursery voucher scheme, and it is pleasing that the Minister is prepared to take on board that partnership, to work and to improve on it.

Despite severe budget restraints and its large rural nature, my local education authority, North Yorkshire—a hung council in which the Conservatives have minority control—has unanimously supported a bid to submit an interim early-years development plan. However, it has real concerns, some of which I shall outline.

The first criterion outlined by the Secretary of State in his letter to LEAs is that he expects them to make 100 per cent. provision by 1999. We support that vision, but in reality few LEAs will be able to meet that target. Two weeks ago, one of the Minister's colleagues said on television that he expected places to be available for all four-year-olds in 1998, but that is simply not possible.

Where would LEAs find the accommodation for four-year-olds in the spring term of 1998? The children could be accommodated in nursery or pre-school classes, but North Yorkshire currently has provision for only 35 per cent. of the cohort. The LEA cannot rely on the private or voluntary sector, because its provision is patchy, due to the county's rural nature, and it cannot take up the slack. Moreover, the £366 per child per term fails to recognise the true cost of quality provision, and certainly does not leave scope to fund any capital or premises expansion, and it is doubtful whether that would be available for 1998 or even 1999.

The second issue is quality. I have referred to the tightness of funding to support expanded provision, but what do the Government mean by "a quality place"? Does the Secretary of State believe, as the hon. Member for Aylesbury obviously does, that £1,100 a year is sufficient to provide a quality place? I reject the view that adults working with children in their early years do not have to be qualified, which is the suggestion that has just been made. The most highly qualified and highly professional staff are needed to provide that quality education which is so essential to such children.

How does the Secretary of State intend local education authorities to monitor the quality of provision in order to create the registers? In addition to LEA nursery provision in North Yorkshire, there are 24 private nursery providers and 252 playgroups, all of which are currently registered. With no additional funding, how will it be possible to achieve what the Secretary of State so rightly wants—quality provision with quality monitoring throughout?

The third issue is, inevitably, funding. Even if we accept that £1,100 is sufficient for an early-years education place—the Liberal Democrats do not accept that—two specific problems arise. Currently, the Government do not have to pay for four-year-olds who do not take advantage of the voucher, but in future LEAs will have to provide those extra places because of the 100 per cent. criterion, and they will have to guarantee that level of provision throughout the LEA. There will be a slight saving on the administration of vouchers but, as the hon. Member for Aylesbury pointed out, the new system will have an increased administrative burden anyhow, so whether there will be an overall saving is problematic.

Where will the extra money come from? In his press statement on 22 May, the Secretary of State made it clear that the £674 million available this year is all that will be available for next year. Yet, in a recent television interview, the Minister for Education and Employment said categorically that, by 1998, places would be available for all four-year-olds. Given the current position of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who has said that there is to be no increase in spending and no virement from other budgets, from where will the money come? If the Government are expecting LEAs to find new resources despite their current funding difficulties, the first education provision battle will be entirely over the flagship of a new nursery or early-years education programme.

Will funding be universal, as with the current voucher system, and will the same principle of a per capita deduction in the under-fives standard spending assessment system apply? The Minister will know that under-fives SSAs vary considerably between LEAs. North Yorkshire has one of the lowest in the country. Unless there is a significant change to the principle and mechanism of the under-fives SSA, or a change to the universality of the value of each place, North Yorkshire will be significantly disadvantaged in its drive to create what the Secretary of State so rightly wants.

The Liberal Democrats accept the need for a quality system of early-years education for all three and four-year-olds whose parents want their children to participate. We firmly believe that a quality early-years education programme needs to recognise the essential difference between early-years education and primary education, particularly the work done in reception classes. If we are to have only extended reception classes to take in all four-year-olds, the new system will be as flawed as the current system.

During the general election campaign, early-years education was the Liberal Democrats' first priority. Before anyone reminds me, yes, our proposals would cost some £200 million in the first year and, yes, we do believe that we must be open and honest and say that we would fund that through taxation.

The reality is that we cannot have a quality early-years education system on the cheap. If the Government propose simply to replicate the voucher system under a different name, the Secretary of State's comments to the House on 21 November 1995 may well be thrown back in his face.

11.46 am

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): I welcome the debate on a most important area of education. I share the concerns of my hon. Friends that not a single Government Back Bencher is present. If the statistics are correct, the education professionals who have joined the Labour Benches far outnumber those on the Conservative Benches. Moreover, the Prime Minister, when asked about his policies during the election, summed them up by saying, "Education, education, education." Obviously, that did not include pre-school education.

I am committed to the concept of nursery education. Not only have I had three children who have gone through a nursery school, but so committed am I that, when my

[Mr. Robert Walter]

last child was there, I agreed to be a parent governor. For the past 16 years, I have been the chairman of governors of a state nursery school not half a mile from the House.

It is a school which, on successive inspections, inspectors have described as a centre of excellence. It is one which I am glad to say has benefited from a committed local authority, the Conservative-controlled City of Westminster, which was committed even before the previous Government's nursery education proposals to providing nursery education for all three and four-year-olds within the city of Westminster. Perhaps I should not say too much, but we receive funding from the city of Westminster which averages slightly more than £5,000 per full-time pupil equivalent.

However, I do not believe that there is a division between Conservative Members and those few on the Government Benches in the desired goals of the debate. When she was Secretary of State for Education and Science in the early 1970s, Baroness Thatcher was committed to nursery education for all. But the last Government did something about it. The framework was established by the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), in a speech in October 1974. He said:

"Because any additional publicly-funded provision must be of high quality, it must promote diversity and parental choice. And it must be carefully targeted in a way that expands, and does not crowd out, the private and voluntary provision we have at present".

The nursery voucher scheme broke new ground in education. It provided a unique system of parental choice and control and equal treatment and equal access to funds for the state, voluntary and private sectors. For the first time, it introduced Ofsted inspections to a sector that had previously been only partially inspected. That quality control laid down some desirable learning objectives—that all children should have personal and social skills taught to them, that they should all benefit from language and literary skills, that they should all acquire a basic mathematical knowledge and all acquire a knowledge and understanding of the world, including science and music.

I believe that the new Government share those goals. We can deduce from the Government's election manifesto that they are certainly committed to nursery education, but during the election they were also committed to the abolition of the voucher system. They have introduced no legislation to that effect, nor has the Secretary of State made a statement to the House. But the Government have not been idle. They issued a circular to chief education officers on 22 May, to which reference has already been made, and the Secretary of State kindly informed the press in a press notice, also on 22 May, of the Government's plans. I find it slightly disturbing that, in the eight weeks that I have been a Member of Parliament, the Government should introduce such important changes by circular and press release rather than in the House.

Let us examine the Government's proposal. The basic principle laid down by the Secretary of State in his press release calls for "a fresh start"—that is an interesting phrase—"in early years education." The Secretary of State continued:

"We are committed to providing high quality nursery places for all four-year-olds where parents want one."

Of course, that is no different from the proposals and policies of the previous Government.

What concerns me more, however, is that the circular sent to local education authorities contained three different proposals. It required all local education authorities to tell the Secretary of State by noon last Monday whether they intended to introduce an interim early-years development plan. If that were the case, they had to produce the plan by 1 July—Tuesday of next week. The plan was to cover the period from September this year to April next year. The second proposal related to authorities with no plan in place for that period. Finally, on an as yet undefined basis, local education authorities, in partnership with the private and voluntary sectors, were to be responsible for the provision of nursery education in their areas from April 1998.

Will the Minister tell us how many local education authorities have said that they intend to submit an interim early-years plan for the period from September until next April? In areas where there will be no plan, has any estimate been made of either the saving or cost of cancelling the nursery voucher scheme, sending numerous letters and circulars to parents, sending application forms to all parents in non-scheme areas, issuing certificates to those parents—certificates which, as one of my hon. Friends has already said, bear a striking resemblance to vouchers—readjusting local education authorities' standard spending assessments and then repeating the whole process in respect of spring 1998?

The system proposed in the circular is confusing and bureaucratic. It states that in the week commencing 9 June, letters are to be sent to all parents, but there will be three variations on the letter:

"(i) to parents of children currently using vouchers in local education authority or grant-maintained provision . . .

(ii) to parents of children currently using vouchers in private/voluntary provision . . .

(iii) to parents newly eligible for the Autumn term".

In the week commencing 23 June, pre-printed application forms are dispatched

"to appropriate parents in those LEAs not planning to submit an interim early-years development plan."

In the week commencing 28 July:

"Eligibility certificates start to be issued to parents who have applied for them."

During the week commencing 6 October, letters go to

"parents of children newly eligible for Spring term".

In the week commencing 27 October, letters go to

"parents using certificates in the Autumn term who will also be eligible for the Spring term."

Finally, in the week commencing 1 December, eligibility certificates for the spring term start to be issued and then letters will be sent to

"parents who applied for an eligibility certificate but whose child appeared on the same Autumn term class lists."

That is the most confusing set of arrangements. One or two parents might have been confused by the introduction of the voucher scheme, but one or two thousand, if not tens of thousands, will be even more confused now.

By April 1999, the Government want all four-year-olds to have some form of pre-school education, as stated in their circular. As has already been pointed out, no extra funding is available. The date of April 1999 implies something of a slippage from what one deduced was the Government's original policy.

We all support the concept of nursery education for four-year-olds. We all support, when funding is available, the extension of that form of education to three-year-olds, but can we be assured that this will not be lost in the quagmire of bureaucratic control that has been introduced to replace what was a simple, easy-to-understand voucher system that is already in place and which could easily continue?

11.58 am

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) for enabling this debate to take place. This is an enormously important subject to all hon. Members. Having said that, I greatly regret the fact that Conservative Members have outnumbered Labour Members by at least 2:1 and, on one occasion, by 4:1. It is difficult to reconcile that with the statements made by Labour candidates during the election when they parroted their leader's claim that Labour's priority was "education, education, education." Looking at the sea of empty green leather in front of us, one would be forgiven for thinking that perhaps the landslide on 1 May was in our favour rather than Labour's. Sadly, that was not the case, but if Labour Members continue to ignore the needs of parents by spurning such debates, perhaps the position will be reversed before too long.

We have heard a great deal this morning about the importance of pre-school education. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) for having dug out so assiduously the American research, which shows that pre-school education can play a vital role in the development of society as a whole. Those who have benefited from it appear to have a reduced inclination towards crime, as well as greater employment prospects and even increased chances of a happy, stable family life.

All-party agreement on the importance of wider pre-school education provision than ever before is vital. I believe that there is such agreement. The question is how that can be achieved. Lady Thatcher, as Secretary of State for Education in 1973, committed the Heath Government to the provision of pre-school education. Given that there was only a year between her declaration and the fall of that Government in 1974, it is not surprising that no progress was made. Sadly, no progress was made during the more than five years of the last Labour Government. It is also a matter of some regret that, for the first 14 or 15 years of the last Conservative Government, no substantial progress was made.

However, in 1994, 15 years after the 1979 election, the then Prime Minister made a clear and categorical commitment—the first that had been made—to universal provision of nursery and pre-school education from the budget of the Department for Education and Employment. That commitment was delivered on time earlier this year. It is a matter of considerable regret that the nursery voucher scheme, which, despite its inevitable teething problems, is beginning to work well, seems to be falling victim to the Government's ideological obsession with stamping out parental choice.

There is a pattern in the Government's approach to education. Any policy that places power in the hands of parents and puts choice in the hands not of bureaucrats but of those who bring up children is to be eliminated. The assisted places scheme is to be exterminated. Grant-maintained schools are to be stamped out. City technology colleges are to dynamited. Grammar schools, no doubt, will be taken out and shot at dawn.

That is the future under the new Labour Government. Anyone who does not accept their local comprehensive school, provided by the local education authority, will have no other choice, unless they are on a salary similar to the Solicitor-General's, which we were debating last night. He can pay for private education for all his children on a salary provided by the taxpayer. Sadly, we are not all in that happy position.

We understand that the Labour party believes that power should be removed from parents, but why is the Minister seeking to put so much power and trust in the hands of local education authorities? Most observers of education in this country recognise that local education authorities have consistently failed those who depend on state education. Time and again we hear stories of failing schools, failing local education authorities, bureaucracy run rampant and money being grabbed and held at the town hall rather than being delivered to the chalk face, where it is needed.

Why does the Minister believe that the future of the critical expanding area of pre-school education should rest in the hands of local education authorities? What assurances will she demand to ensure that resources are not held by town hall bureaucrats and will be passed down to where they need to be spent—with the pupils and teachers?

We have also heard of the importance of diversity. When the Minister liaises with the local education authorities that respond to the Department's circular on an early-years development plan, will she be looking for evidence that they will seek to preserve diversity in provision in their area? Will she make it clear that she will not accept an early-years development plan that relies solely on local education authority provision and that she wants continued Church provision, voluntary group provision and private sector provision in every part of the country? Will she go beyond that and encourage the growth of such sectors in areas where parents currently have little alternative to local education authority provision?

What steps will the Minister take to stop what I think it is not too strong to call the blackmail indulged in by some local education authorities—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Estelle Morris): Blackmail?

Mr. Collins: Yes indeed, that is the right word. They tell parents that, unless they sign up for reception classes at their local school, they have no prospect of their children being able to go to that local primary school of their choice at the age of five. In rural areas such as mine in Cumbria, that is a real threat over the heads of parents, because there may be only one primary school within some miles of their home. If they are told that, unless they sign up to the local reception class for their pre-school child they will not be guaranteed a place at that primary school when their child reaches school age, any element of choice is removed from them. I hope that the Minister will address that.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Minister should also encourage

[Mr. Roy Beggs]

planning departments to be more sympathetic to applications for the conversion of redundant farm buildings in rural areas to provide pre-school nursery provision? There must be equal provision throughout the country, and rural areas must not be neglected.

Mr. Collins: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Like me, he represents a rural constituency. He is right to identify a problem in the planning system, which allows insufficient flexibility for the use of redundant farm buildings. I join him in commending to the Minister the idea that the Department should encourage local planning authorities up and down the land, particularly in rural areas, to look imaginatively at ways of providing additional facilities and buildings for the provision of pre-school education in as wide an area as possible to maximise parental choice, especially in rural areas, where many parents feel that they have no choice and sometimes look enviously at those in urban areas who, because of where they have chosen to live, have the advantage of more choice.

Technology has not been mentioned so far. Within a few years, all those in pre-school education will have been born in the 21st century. Anyone who sees advertisements for children's toys or visits a toy shop knows that one of the fastest-growing sectors in children's toys—certainly in educational toys—is equipment that enables even very small children to become familiar with keyboard skills and the layout of the personal computer, acquiring knowledge that they will need throughout their lives.

For those born in the 1990s and the early years of the next century, the ability to manipulate data and understand how computers operate, finding that a computer is a friend, will be as basic as the skills of reading and writing. I realise that the Minister may not be able to provide an instant solution, but will she consider encouraging all children in pre-school education to have some familiarity with computers? Of course they are not going to be producing programs—we shall not create the next Bill Gates at the age of five—but they could be familiarised with the size, shape and functions of a personal computer. That is an important part of the strategy for pre-school education.

Will the Minister also talk about discipline? The issue is important throughout the education system, but is particularly important among very young children. We are reluctant to think of children under five as capable of committing serious offences—I am sure that almost all of them are not. None the less, in preparing children for later life and for schooling, it is important that some element within the curriculum and the education with which they are provided should encourage the growth of self-discipline, a belief that they are accountable for their actions and the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. When the Minister amplifies the strategy that she has provided for pre-school education, I hope that she will deal with that issue.

The final consideration that I wanted to raise has been helpfully previewed for me by the hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs). Rural areas are in many respects different from urban areas, not least in the provision of education. The question of choice is inevitably different in rural areas. The provision of buildings requires flexibility in the planning system, as the hon. Gentleman said. There is also the issue of how one ensures that in providing pre-school education in rural areas one builds on the best of what is already there and does not stamp out excellent existing provision.

In my constituency the local authority makes high-quality provision for many parents, and I pay tribute to it for that. We also happen to be fortunate enough to have extensive activity among voluntary groups of all sorts. There is a traditional old-world approach that encourages involvement of community groups and voluntary provision. Such an approach has to some extent died out in other parts of the United Kingdom. I hope that, when she comes to review policy on pre-school education in rural areas, the Minister will place importance on the valuable role that voluntary groups can play in assisting direct LEA provision or providing their own forms of pre-school education.

In conclusion, I agree with other hon. Members that there is clearly all-party agreement on the need for pre-school education and for appropriate resources to be found. There is a distinction between the Government and the Opposition on whether the Conservative Government's nursery voucher scheme should continue. The Government will come to regret their decision so swiftly to stamp it out for ideological reasons on entry into office. I hope that the Minister will give priority to the expansion of diversity, the transfer of power and information to parents and the provision of at least as diverse and excellent provision in rural areas as in urban areas.

12.11 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): "New Labour—because Britain deserves better." The first paragraph of the section on education in the Labour manifesto states:

"Education. It is Labour's number one priority."

Mr. David Jamieson (Plymouth, Devonport): Hear, hear.

Mrs. Browning: The Whip is hear-hearing. He needs to hear-hear, because there is no one sitting behind him to hear-hear on behalf of the Labour party. If education were Labour's No. 1 priority, one would have expected the Government Benches to be packed today, but, as other hon. Members have pointed out, the speeches in this debate have come exclusively—*[Interruption.]* I can count. I must tell the hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson) that I had a grammar school education.

It is a disgrace that a party that purported to put education first has been the last—the last to speak and the last to contribute to the debate on a subject that my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) has rightly brought to our attention in the Chamber this morning. Together with my hon. Friends the Members for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins), he has identified clearly what has happened in just eight weeks.

The Labour Government, in their intemperate move to overthrow one policy and replace it with another—evidently without any real preparation—have created great anxiety among parents of under-fives. The number of questions that have come from my hon. Friends for the

Minister to answer shows only too clearly that there is no stability now and no security for parents of children under five. Many questions are unanswered. I shall give the Minister plenty of time to answer them, so I shall keep my remarks brief.

I want to build on some issues that hon. Members have raised this morning, especially the interim development plan. The letter to parents from the Department states that, in the absence of an interim development plan from the local education authority, the Department will issue certificates to parents. Is there any sense of permanence about that? Is it an interim policy? Can the Minister guarantee that, whether there is LEA provision or not, the Government will continue to issue certificates on a permanent basis to parents who, for whatever reason, cannot take the option of LEA provision in their area?

I should like also to build on the point about rural provision. Like many Conservative Members, I represent a truly rural constituency. Many of our primary schools do not have the physical capacity to build a nursery class on their sites. If the aim is universal provision by 1998 or 1999, how does the Minister envisage that capital funding will be provided for rural areas in which existing primary schools cannot extend their buildings?

My hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale mentioned the pressure put on parents by LEA schools to send their children to their own nursery unit in order to have access to a place for their rising five at the primary school. From a sedentary position, the Whip asked me to name names. In the absence of any support from his Back Benchers, he was compelled to make a contribution on behalf of his party, something to which we look forward.

I have already received correspondence from people in Cullompton in my constituency who are concerned about the pressure put on parents. *[Interruption.]* I do not know whether the hon. Member for Devonport will answer the debate. From a sedentary position, he seems to have said more than almost anyone else in the Chamber this morning. Such pressure is of great concern. If LEAs put pressure on parents, they take choice away from them and make a mockery of what the Minister has said will happen—that the Government will continue to acknowledge a role for the private sector in nursery education.

Will the Minister also respond on the following points? I have noted with great interest the Labour document "Opening doors to a learning society", which was endorsed only last year in another policy document. It said:

"Each local education authority will have restored to it the role in the provision of nursery provision outlined by the 1944 Education Act."

Will she confirm that the Education Act 1944 will be restored verbatim to the statute book? My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury asked about the role of an LEA and whether it would be placed on a fully statutory basis or would have an enabling role. It would helpful if the Minister would clarify that matter.

Another issue is the special educational needs of under-fives. The same Labour document stated:

"We believe therefore that each local education authority should identify special educational needs (SEN) co-ordinators for early years provision."

Are steps in hand for that? What progress has been made and how will the Minister liaise with the other statutory bodies involved in SEN provision in health and social services? Nursery education for children with special educational needs will have a higher cost attached to it. If it is to become an education responsibility, will there be a transfer of funds from health or social services? At present, health and social services departments run some special units which provide some form of pre-school or nursery education for special educational needs children.

I return to the Labour document and the various points made by hon. Members about people who live in rural communities. It stated:

"Any extension of nursery education is of little use to children and their parents unless it is accompanied by practical solutions to problems, such as a lack of co-ordination of those with responsibility for under-fives care and lack of effective public transport."

Are we to assume therefore that people in rural communities can now anticipate either provision for transport costs or funding for provision of transport costs, so that the Government's pledge to offer nursery education to every four-year-old can be delivered? We all appreciate that those who live in far-flung hamlets in rural communities face practical problems with regard to transport provision or costs. It would be helpful to know what the Government intend to do to help that group of parents to benefit from the pledge that they have made.

The Government have made particular promises about education provision for three-year-olds. We should like a progress report on how far the Minister has got with her analysis of how that provision could be offered. We should also like to know about the time scale and the costings so that we can judge how the Government will deliver that promise.

12.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Estelle Morris): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on securing this Adjournment debate. He has a good record of managing to secure such debates on education, and no doubt his contribution today will be the first of many. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) on her appointment to the Opposition education team. I am sure that she will now be able to spend more time in this country than she could in her previous position. I hope that she will find her new job fulfilling and will enjoy talking about children rather than cattle; it is certainly a far more interesting subject to me.

This has been a good debate on an important subject. We all share the concern that has been expressed in the House over the past two years about early-years education—a worthy development here. The Labour party has no need to apologise for its record on nursery education. Although the previous Government did little about it for the vast majority of their 18 years in power, Labour local authorities have ensured that many children have had the opportunity to enjoy a top-rate start to their education. It was Labour local authorities, rather than Conservative or Liberal Democratic ones, that delivered the goods. We are happy to be judged on our record in local government and we will match it with a good record in national government. I am conscious of the time constraint, so I will try to say as quickly as possible what I intended to say and answer the points raised.

[Ms Estelle Morris]

I confirm the importance that the Labour Government attach to early-years education and our commitment to something that was not mentioned—the need to integrate early-years education and child care and to give families with young children the support they need.

I am delighted to remind the House that the Government have implemented their pledge to abolish nursery vouchers. In a few weeks, at the end of the summer term, they will be no more. Few will mourn their passing, but many will rejoice at the fact that the money that was formerly wasted on bureaucracy can now be used to provide nursery education.

I did not recognise the nursery voucher scheme that was described by Conservative Members, and I doubt that it would be recognised by parents, providers or the former Select Committee on Education and Employment, which had a Tory majority in the previous Parliament.

Mrs. Browning: Can the Minister tell us the administrative costs of the scheme that she proposes? I am not talking about the inspection costs—the hon. Lady will appreciate that there is a distinction between inspection and administration.

Ms Morris: We have extra money, £100 million, which the Government have put into the early-years scheme in addition to that taken from local authorities through the standard spending assessment.

The hon. Lady will know that £20 million was set aside for inspection and the administration of the bureaucracy behind the nursery voucher scheme. We had a simple choice between spending the £20 million on the provision of places and their inspection and siphoning some of it off to spend on bureaucracy. The hon. Lady's Government decided to siphon some of it off to spend on bureaucracy, but we will make sure that the £20 million will be used to secure places for children. Between £5 million and £10 million will be available for extra places.

The voucher scheme had many faults—for instance, it did not provide any extra places for four-year-olds. In Norfolk, where one of the pilot schemes was conducted, almost a dozen pre-school groups were forced to close because of the competition of the market. It is no good complaining about primary schools that were forced to attract four-year-olds and changed their admission policies to ensure that they got those children, when it was the Conservative Government who advocated the market approach. That is what happens when one relies on competition. Schools will compete against each other and use any means in their power to ensure that they win.

For all the belly-aching that we have heard from Conservative Members, their Government took no action to ensure that four-year-olds did not join reception classes that were too large. They did nothing to stop schools saying that a child could get a place in a reception class only if he or she had been at their nursery.

The previous Government handed over pre-school education to the market—the market ruled, people competed, and the children lost. That is why the Labour Government are determined to offer early-years provision that relies on partnership and co-operation rather than the harmful competition that was fostered by the nursery voucher scheme.

There are many misconceptions about our early-years development programme and genuine questions about it that need to be answered. In the next few weeks, we will publish a White Paper for consultation. It will outline more than I am able to do today—partly because of time constraints and partly because it would not be proper to do so—our medium and long-term plans for early-years provision. Those plans will address many of the issues that have been raised today by Opposition Members, and I hope that they will excuse me for not giving them the detailed answers that they may want.

Our proposals were set out in our document "Early Excellence Centres", which was published in November 1996. They have the twin goals of developing the potential of every child and sustaining the family in a changing and challenging world. We have invited local authorities to submit to the Department their interim early-years development plan. Next week, we will announce the number of local authorities that have done so, but I can tell the House now that a good many have already shown enthusiasm about their potential role.

The role of local authorities is not to provide places within the maintained sector but to work with others in the private and voluntary sectors to secure sufficient places for the four-year-olds in their areas, and, later, for three-year-olds. Those authorities will have to provide the Department with an early-years development plan in accordance with that drawn up by the Early Years Development Forum. Although local authorities will have a lead role to play on that forum, it will include representatives of the private and voluntary sectors as well as health workers, parents and child minders. Those individuals have a natural interest in securing good-quality nursery education and care.

That is why we will not end up with a local authority-dominated programme. The very act of drawing up the early-years development plan will occur in consultation with all the providers. The co-operation and planning that was missing from the nursery vouchers scheme will be included.

Central Government will not approve any plan unless it reveals that a partnership will be established between the voluntary and private sectors. Neither I nor my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has any intention of approving any plan that reveals neither consultation with those other sectors nor any effort to squeeze out from them all that they have to offer. That is our firm commitment.

We will withhold part of the funding unless such co-operation and consultation are apparent. We are deadly serious about that. That policy represents the way forward, for two reasons. Quite honestly, because of the low base from which we are starting in many parts of the country—in many cases, we are talking about Tory authorities that have not discharged their responsibilities correctly—we need what the voluntary and private sectors can offer. We cannot do it without their provision. Sometimes, their provision is more appropriate to parents' needs than is provision within the maintained sector.

We are determined to start meeting the needs of parents in the wider sense—not only with two and a half hours a morning while their child is educated, but with wraparound child care provision that can meet the needs of a family, often headed by a single mother who has to or who chooses to work. It is only when we bring the

private, voluntary and maintained sectors together that we stand a chance, first, of securing provision and, secondly, of having the diversity of provision to meet those needs.

Early-years education is at the top of our agenda, and I am glad that it is at the top of other hon. Members' agendas. I look forward to an exciting and challenging time in which we can, at last, fulfil our wish to provide top-quality nursery education to the many children whose parents wish to avail themselves of it.

Mr. Lidington: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you initiate an urgent check into the annunciator system in the Palace and associated buildings? I ask that so that the House can be assured that the fact that 400 Labour Members of Parliament, including more than 100 teachers, were unable to provide one Back Bencher to support—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. That is not a point of order. There has been no indication this morning that anything is faulty in that respect.

RAF Burtonwood

12.30 pm

Ms Helen Southworth (Warrington, South): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech on a topic that is so important to my constituents. My constituency, Warrington, South, is the very centre of the north west, both geographically and economically. It is strategically important for business, being sited at the crossroads of the M6 and M62 motorways, midway between the cities of Manchester and Liverpool and on the route of the west coast main line.

Warrington has been significant as a business and commercial centre since the bronze age; then the Romans came along. They recognised a quality site when they saw it and established a boom town on the banks of the Mersey at Wilderspool in Latchford, the site of the original ford. The Roman ships that came up the Mersey with goods for the north-west began a waterways tradition that is still active in Warrington, South, although the waterways now support the leisure and tourism industry.

We in Warrington, South are innovators: the first canal to be built in Britain—the Sankey—runs through Great Sankey in my constituency. With the Mersey, the Bridgewater and the Manchester Ship canal, it is one of four inland waterways that are significant features and monuments to Warrington's contribution to the industrial revolution.

Cromwell planned his civil war campaign in Warrington, South and, more happily, on dreamy afternoons Lewis Carroll found inspiration in the beautiful Cheshire countryside and wrote "Alice in Wonderland". We in Warrington are fond of our association with "Alice in Wonderland" and I have wondered in the past few weeks whether it is that association which has helped me to feel familiar with the rabbit warren that is the Palace of Westminster. I have certainly seen many hon. Members running down the corridors of power and wonder whether perhaps they were saying, "Oh, my ears and whiskers, I'm late." When learning about the more obscure traditions of this House, I have often wanted to say like Alice, "Curiouser and curiouser!" There is one key difference: we do not have to paint the white roses red in this House—the electorate have already done that for us.

Cheshire and Lancashire meet in Warrington, South, which contains the best of both worlds. We value our traditions and look to the future. We work in partnerships—between business, local government, voluntary organisations and neighbourhood groups—in seeking to build our community for the benefit of the many and not of the privileged few. On 2 May, we knew that we had a Government who were forward-looking and who would value local communities and recognise the need to work in partnership. We have a one-nation Government, and we welcome them.

My constituency is formed from parts of the old Warrington, North and Warrington, South constituencies. My constituents are fortunate in having been represented by two determined Members of Parliament who have promoted their best interests and been excellent ambassadors for the town. Part of my constituency—Howley and Whitecross—was in Warrington, North and was represented by Doug Hoyle. Doug is loved and respected by the people of Warrington, for whom he has been an indomitable voice. He is now continuing his work on their behalf in another place, and I wish him well.

[Ms Helen Southworth]

My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall), who is sitting to my right, represented the old constituency of Warrington, South for five years and before that he was an excellent leader of the local council. There has been a steady stream of people telling me how effective a Member of Parliament Mike Hall was, and that he will be a hard act to follow. I look forward to that challenge. Mike was a determined voice for his constituents and I wish him and his constituents in Weaver Vale every success.

Burtonwood air base is important to Warrington, South constituents. Mike has represented their interest and concern over the past few years—indeed, he held an Adjournment debate on the subject on 3 May 1995—and I am taking on that mantle in this debate. The air base is a classic example of the Tory Government's attitude to local people and communities. They refused to consult local people about the future use of a large area of land in the middle of their neighbourhood. Had the Tory Government taken the trouble to ask local people about the future use of Burtonwood, they would have avoided the major problems now facing my constituents.

To describe the area, I have to take the House back to 1942, when RAF Burtonwood was a supply depot receiving goods flown in and shipped over from America. Set in the middle of open countryside on the edge of Warrington, it was serviced by a link from the west coast line. There were few movements on local roads and the site had little impact on surrounding countryside. After the cessation of hostilities in 1945, the base became a long-term storage depot for the United States army. The majority of goods movements still took place by rail, with short vehicle movements in and out of the complex. That remained the position until 1992.

The fact that the site retained the name of RAF Burtonwood reflects the Lancashire fondness for keeping place names sometimes centuries after they have ceased to describe a function. No aeroplanes have used the base for at least 50 years, and throughout the entire period the usage has not represented an intrusion to adjoining residents, given the low level of vehicle movements to and from the site.

While RAF Burtonwood experienced the passage of 50 years with only minor changes, the open fields around saw major planned development. The establishment of Warrington new town meant a period of rapid growth in commercial and, most significant to this debate, residential building. Warrington and Runcorn development corporation and, more recently, the Commission for the New Towns, both of which are agencies of the Department of the Environment, have been directly responsible for the extensive building of high-quality residential homes. They have created a leafy suburb to the north, east and west of the Burtonwood side.

The air base is now completely surrounded by what my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale described in 1995, quoting from a 1987 sales brochure from Fairclough Homes, as:

"A carefully chosen location with an abundance of trees, bushes and flowers adorning its landscaped gardens and peaceful cul-de-sac approach road, offering a tranquil and idyllic setting for this delightful range of elegant homes".

Believe me, that was true.

The Government created that semi-rural setting and my constituents moved in, specifically because it was a quiet suburb in which to bring up their families. They settled into a comfortable village community. Then, on Thursday 21 May 1992, my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale received a letter from the Ministry of Defence, informing him that on the following day at 1 pm, the decision to close RAF Burtonwood by summer 1993 would be announced. That announcement was the beginning of radical and unpleasant change for my constituents—change initiated and carried out by the Tory Government. It took place without consultation, and it has resulted in major problems because of inappropriate use of the site.

In his previous incarnation as Member for Warrington, South, my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale said:

"Without consulting local Members of Parliament, Warrington borough council's planning authority or local residents, the MOD unilaterally decided to let the air base as a storage depot for heavy goods vehicles and trailers. It made that decision overnight."—[*Official Report*, 3 May 1995; Vol. 259, c. 297.]

That decision has had a radical impact on the quality of life of my constituents, with hundreds of heavy goods vehicles travelling through residential roads at all hours of the day and night.

Two public inquiries have been held, which considered applications for goods vehicle operators' licences to extend even further the heavy goods vehicle usage of the local residential roads. The statement by the deputy licensing commissioner in his decision of 20 December 1995 gives an impartial view of the unacceptable situation for my constituents. He said:

"There is considerable adverse environmental effect from noise, fumes, disturbance and visual intrusion occasioned to all residents in the vicinity of R.A.F. Burtonwood on the North, South, East and West boundaries caused by the operation of heavy goods vehicles moving to and from R.A.F. Burtonwood and on parking and manoeuvring at the site at all hours of the day and night. This is because the site has been let off at extremely low rental rates by the M.O.D's agents for warehousing storage purposes without any consultation or consideration of the environmental effects of attracting a very large number of H.G.Vs to service the businesses of distributing the goods from the warehouses."

For the past four years, local people, Members of Parliament and Warrington borough council have sought a resolution of this problem from an intractable Tory Government, who have ridden roughshod over the local community. In May 1997, my constituents decided that enough was enough—they voted overwhelmingly to show their confidence in new Labour, turning a Tory majority of nearly 3,000 into a Labour majority of 11,807.

Already that confidence is being justified, as the Labour Government introduce a legislative programme to deliver our election pledges to the people: to reduce class sizes, to introduce faster track punishments for persistent young offenders, to cut NHS waiting lists, to get 250,000 under-25-year-olds off benefit and into work and to set tough rules for Government spending and borrowing.

Those are first steps, but already they are making a real difference to the lives of local people. Already my constituents living around RAF Burtonwood find that they are speaking to a Government who know how to listen to, and take account of, local opinion.

Within the past few days, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State has made it clear that the MOD, as landlord of the site, has taken into account the wishes

of local people and will not grant approval to Professional Distribution Services (International) Ltd. to park vehicles overnight at RAF Burtonwood, thus ensuring that there is no escalation of HGV activity.

This debate gives me the opportunity to bring to the Minister's attention the long campaign to achieve a satisfactory use for this site and to ask for his support in achieving a resolution.

Once it became clear that the MOD was declaring the site surplus to requirements, the local plan was updated to include a notation for the site which provided for an "urban village" concept, with a mixture of land uses including residential, commercial and open space. RAF Burtonwood is one of three large sites in close proximity which are of strategic importance to the development of Warrington. Each site is managed by a different Government Department or agency. I share with Warrington borough council and local residents the opinion that it would make sense to combine all the public land in the area under a single agency, so that there can be a comprehensive and integrated approach to future development in the area, which can address the concerns and aspirations of residents satisfactorily.

The previous Government failed my constituents when they turned RAF Burtonwood into a commercial storage and distribution depot. With a new Government, we have the opportunity to take a positive way forward, which has been advocated by local people and local elected representatives. With a strategic approach, we can create the urban village that my constituents have good reason to call for, and we can deliver the growth, prosperity and new employment opportunities which the Warrington of the future needs.

12.44 pm

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth) on her maiden speech. It must be rare for the immediate predecessor of the Member who makes a maiden speech to be present in the Chamber to receive such high praise; I thank her for it. As one of her constituents, I am confident that she will do an excellent job representing her entire constituency. Judging from the quality of her maiden speech, we are certain that she will do so. I look forward to many opportunities to debate in the Chamber with my hon. Friend the future of the north-west and the whole country under new Labour and the premiership of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair).

I thank my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Defence for allowing me to speak briefly in the debate. I shall not detain the House long.

I am delighted that there is now a prospect of a better use for the RAF Burtonwood site. I declare an interest, as a resident of the picturesque village aptly described by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South.

I am certain that the Under-Secretary can give assurances on several matters. First, we need a planned way forward for the development of the site, which meets the approval of, not only the local planning authority, but local residents. Secondly, we need an environmental audit into the deficiencies in the area so that whatever happens at RAF Burtonwood will help to make the position better, not worse. Thirdly, in the short term, we need to consider what is happening on the site now, to minimise the impact on residents who live around RAF Burtonwood.

I am confident that, when the Under-Secretary addresses the House shortly, he will give us assurances.

Finally, I place on record my pleasure at hearing the news that the MOD will not, as landlord, give its approval to the vehicle operator's licence of Professional Distribution Services (International) Ltd. That is welcome news indeed. I look forward to the Minister's speech.

12.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): Just before this debate started, the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) raised the issue of attendance in the Chamber. I think it pertinent, therefore, to point out the lack of attendance—even on the Front Bench—of any Conservative Member for this important debate. It shows the Conservatives' lack of interest in the north-west and shows how right the north-west was to reject them totally on 1 May.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth) on her success in obtaining the debate. Obviously, it is a matter of great importance to her constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall), who spoke briefly. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South on an excellent speech, in which she spoke movingly about her constituency and forcefully argued the case for her constituents, as I am sure that she will continue to do for many years to come.

The disposal of the former United States Army base at Burtonwood near Warrington has, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South said, generated considerable public interest. I believe, therefore, that, before I address the detailed points that she raised, a brief resumé of the issue would be helpful, to give a greater understanding of the background.

The size of the defence estate has been reducing more or less since the end of the second world war. With the ending of the cold war, a large amount of surplus defence property was identified and disposal of most of it is in hand or completed. Moreover, the problem of how effectively to dispose of large, complex military sites is currently facing a number of allies.

In the United Kingdom, we are committed to continuing the process of identifying surplus assets, and that will be a feature of our recently announced strategic defence review. Whenever possible, we work closely with local authorities in determining what long-term alternative uses might be suitable for such sites, and we shall try to ensure that disposals are managed in a way that will allow the land to be returned to non-defence use as soon as possible.

RAF Burtonwood was used by the United States Army until August 1993, when it vacated the site as a result of the general withdrawal of US forces from Europe following the end of the cold war. Following that withdrawal, the Ministry of Defence considered whether the site could be used for alternative defence purposes. After much detailed consideration, it was concluded that it would not be practicable to use the site for UK defence purposes. Accordingly, a decision was taken to proceed with plans to dispose of the site, adopting an open-market strategy. I recognise that it took the Department some time to reach this conclusion, but that may be a reflection of changing assumptions at the time of the "Front Line First" study and also of the considerable efforts made to identify alternative defence uses.

[Mr. John Spellar]

RAF Burtonwood comprises some 20 hectares of covered warehousing under one roof, known as Header house, and is reputedly the largest building of its kind in Europe. The base, in its current configuration, was developed in the early 1950s for use by the United States army as a storage depot, to provide logistic support for American operations in Germany. It provided 30 warehouses, each extending to 5,000 sq m. Overall, therefore, the site provides 150,000 sq m of covered storage.

Government policy on disposal is to secure the best price that can reasonably be obtained for surplus property. Treasury guidance recognises, however, that this approach needs to be in accord with the local planning framework; and that there may also be circumstances—for instance, to do with historic buildings—in which it would be reasonable to consider wider issues. The Government's aim is also to work with local authorities and others to ensure that protecting the interests of the taxpayer does not conflict with meeting our wider employment and environmental objectives, or with local planning and social considerations.

We must recognise that any empty site such as RAF Burtonwood is a substantial burden on resources. The costs incurred in maintaining and securing empty sites are significant and ways must be found of meeting them. The early disposal of surplus property is and will continue to be a high priority. But until such time as disposal is secured, these running costs, which fall on my Department, must be considered.

In other words, there is a further element in this difficult and complex equation: the taxpayers' interest, as they have to meet these costs—in this case through the Ministry of Defence and RAF Strike Command, which is the top-level budget holder responsible for the site. My hon. Friend may be interested to learn that the costs of maintaining the site are about £16,000 a week, or over £850,000 a year.

In order to defray costs in the short term, the Department has arranged a number of short-term lettings to reduce the taxpayers' expenditure. Although, as my hon. Friend will understand, we regard the exact income that we are generating from tenants at RAF Burtonwood as commercially confidential, I can advise her that it comes to a total of nearly £1 million a year, net of costs. She will appreciate, I am sure, that that removes a not insignificant burden on the defence budget, and is ultimately of benefit to the taxpayer, too. In addition to these returns, there are about 300 people working on the site.

The current situation has come about as a result of the original disposal strategy under the previous Administration, which was to build up the commercial use of the site by completing new tenancies of three and five years' duration and then selling the site as a going concern with the benefit of good, short-term income, thereby allowing prospective purchasers to plan in the longer term for its redevelopment. It was felt then that that presented an opportunity to dispose of the site quickly while—because of the generated cash flow—meeting our obligation to maximise the return to the taxpayer.

I must stress, however, that my Department never considered that the site would be used for storage and distribution in the long term. On the contrary, it was envisaged as becoming part of the sustainable redevelopment which, as my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, is taking place in the Great Sankey area in general and the adjoining repair depot—the BRD site—in particular.

The local defence land agent met the Commission for the New Towns and PACE—Property Advisers to the Civil Estate—in late 1995 and early 1996 to review the strategy for the sale of Government land assets in the Burtonwood area of Warrington. As a result of those meetings, the Commission for the New Towns appointed consultants to produce a report, the Westbrook study, on the matter; it identified various benefits to be had from these public bodies co-operating in their local disposal strategies.

However, there were difficulties in progressing the study's immediate recommendations. These included problems over access arrangements to the site through the land owned by the Commission for the New Towns, and it is a matter of regret that no agreement was reached on that. As a result, PACE, which had already secured a residential planning consent, decided to proceed with the first phase of the disposal of its own site—but this action does not compromise any of the Westbrook study recommendations.

We fully recognise that the original disposal strategy led to a problem with short-term use. Considerable residential development has been taking place in the vicinity of RAF Burtonwood in recent years, and the amount of commercial use, especially the increase in HGV movements, has given rise to a considerable number of justifiable complaints from local residents about nuisance and noise, particularly at night.

It was clear that our commercial tenants created more HGV movements than those generated by the US army, whose activities primarily involved the long-term storage of war reserves and so generated relatively few vehicle movements and little on-site activity—especially as a great deal was accomplished by rail. So I understand the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend on behalf of local residents.

In May 1995, the then Minister for Defence Procurement, Roger Freeman, assured the House that there would be no intensification of activity at RAF Burtonwood, and I understand that positive steps have been taken to minimise the disturbance caused by current activities. The local defence land agent, in conjunction with the site's managing agents, has introduced a series of mitigating measures and controls. They include the imposition of stringent site rules, limiting site operating hours, night patrolling, driver training and direction of traffic flow.

We believe that these arrangements have to some extent been successful in getting rid of the worst problems. We understand that Warrington borough council has recently acknowledged that there is no current breach of environmental legislation. We are, however, fully aware that some properties in Burtonwood road still suffer some environmental impact from tenants' HGV movements.

Indeed, as my hon. Friend said, two tenants' applications for operator's licences have been refused on appeal by the north-west traffic commissioner, and another application is pending. We shall not allow any intensification of use; accordingly, we have not given, and will not give, our consent to the site being so used. I have written to my hon. Friend to confirm that, because she rightly drew my attention to the current application.

The Department has continued to examine the various disposal options, and it decided in April to appoint a firm of consultants quickly to review again the avenues available to us. They have reviewed the work undertaken and the progress made to date. They have met all the key players, including representatives of the borough council, PACE, the Commission for the New Towns and two residents' action groups. I am pleased to say that the new study is largely complete and will be presented to RAF Strike Command, the site owner, early next month.

It would be premature at this stage to prejudge the report's recommendations—but they will cover all the various options, including continuing the present B8 use and also the long-term phased development of the site for residential purposes, possibly via a development partnership between the MOD and the Commission for the New Towns or another developer. The report's recommendations will guide me when deciding what the best future disposal strategy might be, bearing in mind the need for more urgency which both my hon. Friends have stressed in today's debate. That is why I wrote to my hon. Friend on 11 June assuring her that the Department and I will consult her and other interested parties before a final decision is made.

I assure my hon. Friend and other hon. Members representing the area that we are very much aware of their concerns and those of local residents regarding the commercial activities at RAF Burtonwood. While the current permitted use of the site is for storage and distribution, it is not envisaged that that will be long-term, given the nature of development on the surrounding sites. We look forward to discussing the future of the site further once we have the new report to hand, which I hope will be in the near future.

Scottish Environment Protection Agency

1 pm

Ms Roseanna Cunningham (Perth): I am grateful for this opportunity to raise the financial crisis facing the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. The Government are fully aware of the matter, and I seek more than just kind words and platitudes in the Minister's reply.

SEPA needs a commitment of more money or, alternatively, a decision to allow it to reclaim VAT in the same way as its sister body in England and Wales. Scotland will regard anything less as the Government undermining environmental protection. It will show that the Prime Minister's words in the United States on the environmental crisis facing the planet were nothing more than empty rhetoric and an attempt to spin a feel-good story for the UK press.

Many hon. Members will remember the debate surrounding the creation of SEPA and the broad welcome that the body received from a variety of organisations and interest groups in Scotland. A powerful environment agency has long been the policy of the Scottish National party. We want the existing powers strengthened and the agency's resources increased.

In the first year of its operation, SEPA earned positive comment from key environmental groups in Scotland. The head of research at Friends of the Earth Scotland said:

"Our view is that SEPA has now found its feet and shown itself to be competent and even-handed . . . The Agency has shown itself to be fairly open, not afraid of tackling big issues and reasonably forward thinking."

The head of policy at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Scotland, Mr. Steve Sankey, pointed out that SEPA made an impressive start in its first year of operation. However, it now needs to move on to much more proactive work, where it could have a significant input. A sustainability concept is built into its remit and it needs to be able to argue that, in Scotland and for Scotland.

However, SEPA's initial success in getting its work up and running, and in building a fully integrated agency, is threatened by a funding crisis that will prevent any truly proactive work. Resolving the problem lies fairly and squarely in the Government's hands. I wish briefly to explain the basis of the financial crisis, before highlighting in detail the impact of the resulting cuts.

A number of observers estimate that SEPA faces a potential £5 million shortfall in its budget this year. That is due partly to past underfunding by the Scottish Office, but also largely to a tax anomaly, which allows the agency's English and Welsh counterpart, the Environment Agency, to reclaim VAT from Customs and Excise but prevents SEPA from doing the same. The ability to reclaim VAT under section 33 of the Value Added Tax Act 1994 is worth some £50 million to the English and Welsh agency, and could be worth £2.7 million to SEPA. That is a significant sum—some 10 per cent. of SEPA's overall budget.

Bodies whose responsibilities SEPA inherited, such as the Scottish River Purification Board, could reclaim VAT, and SEPA rightly set its budget projections assuming that it would enjoy the same rights as its predecessors and the Environment Agency. The Scottish Office settlement for SEPA for this financial year was based on the assumption

[Ms Roseanna Cunningham]

that VAT would be recoverable, which has been the assumption since 1 April 1996. Indeed, it was reiterated as recently as 9 May 1997 at a meeting between Scottish Office officials and SEPA.

The Scottish Office seems to have been every bit as certain as SEPA, as recently as last month, that VAT would be recoverable. From the outset, plans have been made on that basis, and on the Scottish Office's reassurance that negotiations between it and Customs and Excise were continuing to resolve the problem.

The Minister can miss out the section of his speech where I anticipate he will offer various legal excuses for not granting SEPA the same reclaim status as the Environment Agency. I understand that the Environment Agency receives its section 33 refund because it receives funding from local authorities, whereas SEPA, as a quango, does not. The current feeling is that to allow a quango to reclaim would open up a precedent for other quangos to demand precisely the same.

I would argue that that is a technical excuse, and one which the Minister has already used in his replies to my recent questions on that issue. I do not want to hear excuses; I want the Government to come forward with solutions; otherwise, the crisis facing SEPA will have extremely damaging consequences for Scotland's environment.

The chair of SEPA's main board, Professor Turmeau, said that the current situation is "daft". Expanding on that, Beth Corcoran, SEPA's head of finance, summed up the problem in the *New Statesman*, when she said:

"It is an anomalous situation that does not make logical sense."

The Government must act now to resolve that anomalous, illogical problem, not run away from it or hide behind civil service excuses.

In recent months, the impact of the budget crises on SEPA has become clearer. John Beveridge, director of SEPA's western region, summed up the broader impact of the threatened shortfall in the *New Scientist* in April, when he said:

"A lot of what we have achieved in the past 12 months is now in jeopardy. Just when we were getting into our stride, we have been stopped in our tracks."

Nationally, SEPA has frozen all job vacancies, halted all capital expenditure and slashed environmental monitoring around factories, sewage works, nuclear plants and fish farms. SEPA's eastern region has suspended monitoring of pollution incidents outside office hours, halved the number of inspections of waste tips and scrapped air sampling around large industrial sites. The impact of such cuts should not be underestimated. The Prime Minister has made much of a claim that the UK will further cut carbon dioxide emissions, but in Scotland essential monitoring of industrial sites' emissions simply will not be done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh) has had constituency experience of the impact of those cuts. A number of his constituents have had great difficulty even contacting SEPA, never mind getting it to act on the pollution incident that was the focus of their concern.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): My hon. Friend is aware of the atrocious and long-standing environmental problems affecting the Hospitalfield housing estate in Arbroath, with which SEPA simply cannot cope, because it lacks the equipment to measure pollution and has withdrawn the weekend monitoring service. If we are to have a genuine environmental protection agency, it must be properly equipped and financed, not starved of equipment and finance.

Ms Cunningham: Indeed. Such sentiments are echoed by others.

Judith Nicol, clerk to the River Tweed commissioners, highlighted the risks surrounding the removal of out-of-hours water pollution cover for a river renowned for its salmon runs, and for which water quality is key to a multi-million pound salmon industry. She said:

"The emergency cover is something that should be removed as a last resort, not first; whoever is responsible should sort this out as soon as possible because these are fundamental services that need to be maintained."

Thus far, the Government have failed miserably to "sort this out". They must be aware of the consequences of their failure.

In SEPA's western region, plans to clean streams and introduce flood warning systems have been abandoned. In the northern region, laboratory maintenance has ceased. I do not know whether the Government think that some cuts are justifiable, but what has been cut and what is threatened by SEPA's budget crisis include key areas of environmental monitoring, the maintenance of which is essential. For example, does the Minister believe that monitoring radiation levels in the Holy loch should be cut? Well, they have been.

As a result of the costs of monitoring for radioactive particles at Sandside bay, near Dounreay, investigations and monitoring for radiation at other sites will have to be curtailed. Is it acceptable to the Government that SEPA may no longer be in a position effectively to regulate the nuclear industry, or is that part of the plan, with the Environment Agency in England and Wales increasingly encroaching on SEPA's nuclear monitoring responsibilities, especially in the UK Radioactive Incident Monitoring Network?

In addition to SEPA's current duties, which it is struggling to meet, a range of new statutory responsibilities are to fall on the agency. Those include consultation on the national waste strategy and the national air quality strategy, ensuring compliance with waste packaging regulations, and overseeing the extension of pollution controls to small businesses.

On 26 April, *The Scotsman* quoted an unidentified board member as saying:

"There is no way these new responsibilities can be met, it is as simple as that—the Scottish Office needs to give up more money or they can forget it."

That quote identifies the problem and points to the solution.

Professor Colin Reid, professor of environmental law at the university of Dundee, is similarly succinct in his proposed solution. I hope that the Government will respond positively to at least part of his suggested strategy for removing the current burden from SEPA. In a letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Angus on 7 May, he stated:

"A remedy is required, whether short-term support to 'fill the gap' until future budgeting is done on the new basis, or through amendments to the law to relieve SEPA of this burden in the future."

That is the choice facing the Government. They can either make good SEPA's shortfall, or they can pursue a legal solution which would alter SEPA's status to allow the agency to reclaim VAT, or provide a specific exemption that would allow SEPA access to a section 33 payback.

If necessary, the issue must be pursued vigorously with the Treasury. In particular, I hope that the Minister will not allow the Treasury to get away with the sort of nonsense contained in its answer to the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) on 19 June 1997, which stated:

"Tax liabilities of publicly funded bodies are taken into account when setting levels of public expenditure in Scotland."—[*Official Report*, 19 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 270.]

SEPA has been stumped by a loophole—a technicality—which has punched an enormous hole in its budget. That irrelevant ministerial reply displays a lack of understanding of the problem and a contempt for the needs of Scotland's environment.

The Scottish Office has been guilty of a similar contempt in its reply to my own questions on SEPA. The Minister tells me rather uninformatively in a written answer that the Secretary of State for Scotland "regularly discusses various issues" with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is clear from the Minister's reply that he has not discussed SEPA's VAT reclaim. That is a failure on the part of the Scottish Office to defend Scotland's interests and its environment. I hope that the current Secretary of State will not, like his predecessor, be more the Cabinet's man in Scotland than Scotland's man in the Cabinet.

If the Government fail to take either of the suggested routes to a solution, they will be sending a clear signal that, despite the green commitments from the Prime Minister's spin doctors this week, the Government's environment strategy will be no more than hot air, adding to the global warming crisis. We need more than words; we need urgent action.

I shall end with two thoughts from the period when SEPA was created. As I said, SEPA was widely welcomed by, among others, the editorial pages of Scotland's newspapers. The *Herald* editorial on 2 April 1996 warned that, if SEPA was to be effective, it

"will have to have teeth, and know how to use them."

As things stand, SEPA's teeth have been blunted. That cannot be allowed to continue.

When the Minister's predecessor, the Earl of Lindsay, officially launched SEPA, he boasted:

"SEPA will be Scotland's first national agency with the resources and expertise to tackle the distinctive needs of Scotland's environment".

I doubt whether the Minister could make that boast today, because, despite the good works and the great promise of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, it no longer has the resources to complement its undoubted expertise. It certainly does not have the resources to move into a more proactive role, which many would welcome.

I am sure that the Minister will be keen to kick off his ministerial career by being able at least to match the boasts of the Conservative party. I give him that opportunity today. I am not interested in apportioning past blame for the situation. What is needed is a resolution now of the problem. The Minister must meet the needs and expectations of Scotland and act to save SEPA from a legal technicality that was unforeseen and yet will be unforgivably damaging to the effectiveness of environmental protection in Scotland.

1.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Malcolm Chisholm): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Perth (Ms Cunningham) for raising the debate today. The issues that she has mentioned are an important matter of great public concern, and have been the subject of considerable media coverage recently. I am glad, therefore, of the opportunity to put the record straight.

It may be useful if I begin my response to the hon. Lady with a little background. Following the passage of the Environment Act 1995, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency was established in October that year. Labour Members supported the creation of a single pollution control body for Scotland.

On 1 April 1996, SEPA took over the responsibilities of a range of predecessor bodies. It inherited the water pollution control functions of the river purification authorities—that is, the seven mainland river purification boards and the three islands councils—and the waste regulation and certain air pollution functions previously delivered by the district and island councils. From the Scottish Office it acquired the functions of Her Majesty's industrial pollution inspectorate and the hazardous waste inspectorate.

The other necessary piece of background information is section 33 of the Value Added Tax Act 1994. That section allows certain bodies to reclaim the VAT that they incur on the purchases attributable to their non-business activity, in addition to the VAT that they can recover in the normal way on their business purchases.

For Government and public bodies, including organisations such as SEPA, activities that they are required to carry out by law are generally regarded as non-business. Section 33 status therefore enables such bodies to reclaim tax associated with activities that they are required by law to carry out.

As the hon. Lady knows, SEPA's predecessor bodies had differing VAT status. The district and islands councils and the river purification boards were entitled to claim refunds of VAT, whereas the two Scottish Office inspectorates were not. The reason for this difference was that the former bodies had the right to precept on local taxation, but the others did not.

Why is the right to precept the determining factor? The answer lies in undertakings given when VAT was introduced. In 1972, the Government promised that VAT would not fall as a burden on local taxes. Section 33 of the 1994 Act is now the means by which that promise is delivered. It has been the policy of successive Governments that only bodies that have the power to precept on local taxation may be considered for new additions to section 33.

That brings us to the present day. SEPA is a non-departmental public body financed by grant in aid from central Government and by fees and charges. It has no right to precept on local taxation. It is therefore not eligible to claim refunds of VAT on its non-business activity. That is not in itself a disadvantage to SEPA,

[Mr. Malcolm Chisholm]

as the Government ultimately determine the overall resources available to it to ensure that it can meet its obligations.

The hon. Lady referred to a meeting on 9 May between Scottish Office officials and SEPA. I do not recognise her account of that meeting. She claims that there has always been an assumption that VAT would be recoverable. Of course, we have inherited the previous Administration's distribution of resources, and I cannot speak for them. I understand, however, that SEPA's provision was intended to enable it fully to deliver its functions and to meet its obligations.

SEPA is facing financial constraints, but that is a fact of life for all public sector bodies, and private sector ones as well. My noble Friend Lord Sewel, who is the Minister responsible for the environment, has already met SEPA officials to discuss the agency's funding difficulties. We are at present considering with SEPA what is necessary to allow it to carry out its functions related to the protection of the Scottish environment.

The Secretary of State will provide SEPA with all the resources necessary for it to meet its statutory obligations, including the new ones to which the hon. Lady referred. In a normal year, SEPA's VAT liability would be about £1 million—not £2.7 million, as stated by the hon. Lady. That compares with its current budget of about £28 million. While that liability is clearly a pressure on the organisation, it is not as big a problem as some have claimed, and must be viewed in the context of SEPA's overall financial provision.

The hon. Lady contrasted that situation with the treatment of the Environment Agency in England. Although that agency delivers in England and Wales the functions performed by SEPA in Scotland, it has a wide range of other responsibilities that SEPA does not carry out. They include flood defence, fisheries, recreational use of water, and navigation. In particular, it is responsible for flood defence work, which is largely funded from drainage levies on English and Welsh local authorities. Those levies total more than £200 million per year, and contribute nearly 40 per cent. of the agency's income. Therefore, the agency is eligible to claim refunds of VAT.

The Government and SEPA attach the highest priority to SEPA's continuing to perform its core functions, which cover a wide range of activities. SEPA is responsible for promoting the cleanliness of Scotland's fresh and tidal waters by regulating discharges to the water environment and for providing flood warning systems and advising on flood risk. It issues authorisations to operators of processes prescribed under part I of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. It is responsible for licensing waste management sites and waste carriers and brokers. The agency can take enforcement action against anyone who pollutes the environment illegally.

The continued delivery of those core functions, including the availability of emergency and out-of-hours cover, constitutes the day-to-day business of environment protection in Scotland. The Government are committed to maintaining that business.

Mr. Welsh: Will the Minister explain what he means by "out-of-hours cover"? He may be aware of the Hospitalfield situation in Arbroath. Residents live in an atrocious environment on weekends, but are unable to contact anyone in SEPA. An out-of-hours or weekend service is surely essential in those circumstances, but SEPA claims that it cannot finance such a service. How does that fit with the Minister's assertion that SEPA's finances are perfectly adequate?

Mr. Chisholm: Hospitalfield is an operational matter for SEPA. The Government are committed to providing adequate funding for SEPA's core functions. Beyond delivering those functions, SEPA must determine priorities among its other activities in light of the resources available to it. They include assessments of the general state of the environment, and appropriate research and development. They are desirable, rather than essential, activities, and progress with them is not allowed to undermine SEPA's core business.

I assure the House that the Government are committed to protecting the environment of Scotland. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency has done much since it was established. In a very short time, it has pulled together the functions of 64 predecessor organisations and staff from many of those bodies. It has delivered effective environmental regulation from day one. It has published a state of the environment report and a draft national waste strategy. I congratulate the board and the staff on those achievements. We intend to build on that record of success.

North Yorkshire Ambulance Trust

1.23 pm

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): I am grateful that my topic has been selected for debate this afternoon, as it is extremely important to the people of Scarborough and Whitby, the people of North Yorkshire and our near neighbours.

I congratulate the Minister of State for Public Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell), on her recent appointment, and I wish her well in her endeavours on behalf of my constituents. Unfortunately, we do not have a full complement of Members in the House at present—perhaps because the debate has been called early. I wrote to those hon. Members who have an interest in such matters advising them of the debate, and I look forward to seeing them here before I conclude.

On 14 November 1996, Channel 4 screened an edition of the "Dispatches" programme that made a series of allegations about the North Yorkshire ambulance trust's operational effectiveness and management style. The programme initiated much local concern in North Yorkshire, and featured heavily in the national media. Following those allegations, the regional health office set up an independent review panel, chaired by Mrs. Anne Galbraith, on 15 November 1996. The long-awaited report was finally published on 3 June 1997.

Shortly after the publication of the report, the chair of the trust, Mr. Murray Naylor—who is, incidentally, a newly elected Conservative county councillor for the Rillington division—resigned from his post. A fortnight before the report was published, the chief executive, Mr. Michael King, retired on the grounds of ill health, at the relatively young age of 37. I must point out that I began my parliamentary career at the relatively ancient age of 40, and the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), recently assumed his responsibilities almost at the age at which Mr. King has retired.

I am also led to believe that some questions remain unanswered regarding Mr. King's illness. That is a serious concern for me and for those in the ambulance service who do not know what Mr. King's problem is. Front-line staff drew certain allegations to my attention and to that of the "Dispatches" programme producers. Some of those who blew the whistle about concerns within the trust were disciplined, and several people were dismissed for breaching their contracts of employment. Subsequent industrial tribunals upheld the management's decisions. As a result of the report's findings, I believe that the management's staff dismissal process looks unsafe, and I urge the Minister to consider that matter.

We may contrast the management's treatment of its staff with the tolerance that it showed to the former chief executive, Mr. King, during his long period of ill health. Many people in public service in North Yorkshire are deeply puzzled about that obvious inconsistency in the treatment of staff at different ends of the trust hierarchy. I believe that the matter should be re-examined in light of the review panel's findings.

The Galbraith report raised several key points. The national health service executive, Northern and Yorkshire region, states in a press release of 3 June:

> "Performance standards were marginally over-stated but there was no evidence to substantiate the allegation of deliberate manipulation"

of figures. It continued:

> "The decision to procure a new command and control system, costing more than £650,000 was not fully tested against alternatives."

The panel, quite rightly, questioned the appropriateness of the technology in view of the size of the trust. The procurement, installation and commissioning of the system are heavily criticised in the report.

The Galbraith report also decided that the trust's ratio of operational ambulance staff to trainers is inadequate. Although the trust fell into significant arrears with its paramedic re-certification programme in 1996, the panel found that the situation has improved. Galbraith also found that the organisation's management style had adversely affected the trust's operational effectiveness, and that was severely criticised in the report.

The trust took some remedial action following the James Dean incident, which was a sad incident in which a teenager died, but the issue remains of the responsiveness of the service to accident calls. The panel believed that there were some lessons to be learned, and I shall deal with them shortly.

The key point, as the panel decided, was a failure to separate income generation calls—those that concerned assistance for the veterinary service and dentistry—from emergency calls, which is why the service exists so as to help us. There seems to have been some confusion in the control room about the priorities to be given to incoming calls, which led to severe operational efficiency defects. The panel found that the problem had been remedied by the trust by early June.

I feel that there are some essential national lessons to be learned from this sorry tale. I know that the community in North Yorkshire expects that locally and nationally our health service should be managed efficiently, and should be there to deliver within the highest standards of public service.

As a former railway manager, I have carefully studied the Galbraith report and its findings. I have mounting concern about the internal management structure and style that was pervasive over the period leading up to the report being delivered. That structure and style failed to deliver an honest team-working spirit. I see a failure to establish what I regard as a no-blame culture within the workplace. I am concerned especially that there seem to be unresolved issues. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will consider these, perhaps in a later response.

I shall now inform the House of the sad events that occurred on the afternoon of Saturday 7 June. They took place in front of me during a journey that I was making between my constituency and York, within the constituency of the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), who I see has now joined us in the Chamber. At about 3 pm, the radio news had just finished, and at that moment I could not really believe what I was seeing in front of me. I saw, about six vehicles ahead of my car, that a roof ladder had become detached from a pick-up truck and was lying almost horizontally across the opposite carriageway. It had the appearance of crop sprayer.

[Mr. Lawrie Quinn]

I saw a private car and a coach moving towards the ladder from the direction of York. The coach hit the ladder, and its windscreen was shattered. I pulled over and tried to help.

I discovered that the coach was occupied by a class of 12-year-olds from the Cavendish school, Hemel Hempstead. I am glad to report that no serious injuries resulted. I believe that that was due to the fact that all the children were wearing lap seatbelts, and because the driver was wearing sunglasses, which protected his eyes.

I made a 999 call on my mobile telephone at about six minutes past 3 o'clock. That was about four minutes after the accident had happened. The police attended within several minutes. I must commend them on their prompt action.

The problem, as I see it, was that the first ambulance arrived at about 25 minutes past 3, well beyond the standard response time that is expected. As I had studied the Galbraith report only a few days before the accident took place, and had been assured by subsequent press reports from the trust that major improvements had been made in meeting response times—I am on record locally in commending the work that has been done—I became concerned about response times. I feel that it is still a significant issue in north Yorkshire.

These events led me to call and write to Madam Speaker to ask for an Adjournment debate. I am grateful to her, because she must have thought that the matter deserved some attention.

I have some key questions for my hon. Friend the Minister. First, are the Government happy that the inquiry was wholly independent? As a test, I shall use an extract from a letter that was sent from my close and hon. Friend the Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley) to Mrs. Galbraith on 20 December 1996. I shall quote the paragraph about the independence of the inquiry. It reads:

"You will be aware that I have expressed concern about whether your inquiry will be independent. I understand that the North Yorkshire Ambulance Service was involved in 'headhunting' members of the inquiry team and in setting your initial terms of reference. I regard this as unsatisfactory but will judge your report on its merits before deciding whether to ask the Public Accounts Committee to investigate the allegations about the service."

I would like feedback on that issue. I, too, am concerned that we may have to ask the Public Accounts Committee to investigate further.

In addition to that test, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister what measures the regional health executive officials are taking to ensure proper performance and adherence to corporate governance requirements for the future of the North Yorkshire ambulance trust, and, indeed, for the future of all national health service trusts. Has any performance recovery plan been established? I would like to know also whether that has been requested and whether such a plan will be published. Will the public of North Yorkshire be able to learn of the targets?

I wish to ascertain also whether my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will be giving detailed and early consideration to the future occupancy of key positions within the trust. I should like to see a serious re-evaluation of the appointments process within a key public service that extends across the country. The findings of the Galbraith report suggest that that should happen.

There are key questions of accountability and accessibility to the community served within such an important public service. These factors should be taken into account if any future design is made for improving guidelines for appointments to health trusts.

Some published mechanism should be established that allows for positive feedback from public servants within a no-blame, no-bully culture. That would allow and encourage a real team-building process. It would allow also an honesty of approach, to ensure that we have the most effective services from health trusts.

I would like the Minister, if it is possible, to deal with the rumours that are now abroad in North Yorkshire and Humberside about the possible merger of the two ambulance trusts. These rumours are sapping staff morale and causing loss of staff confidence. I am talking of people who have been knocked from pillar to post by the events that led to the Galbraith inquiry.

I believe that the North Yorkshire ambulance service has an identity of its own. In spite of the sorry management regime investigated by Mrs. Galbraith and her team, the service has developed a strong relationship with the people of North Yorkshire. Those who work in the service are to be commended for the work they do.

I should like to think that the problems caused by ineffective management that ensued over several years from the birth of the trust, and which have been outlined so clearly by the Galbraith report, will not be taken as a basis for any merger of services, which I believe to be geographically unsustainable.

It would not be in the best interests of the people of Scarborough and Whitby, or of those of North Yorkshire or the national community, for us to be thinking about such a merger on the basis of the problems that I have outlined. I shall be interested to hear my hon. Friend's response.

1.39 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): First, I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn), for not being in the Chamber at the beginning of the debate. These half-hour debates usually start on time. Given the six minutes that it takes to walk from Millbank to the Chamber, I was not able to be in my place when the debate began because of the early start.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, and on the measured way in which he raised the issue of the North Yorkshire ambulance service.

I had thought of attempting to secure a similar Adjournment debate, but I concluded that I would not do so, for reasons that I now declare. Mr. Murray Naylor, who was until recently the chairman of the trust, and who resigned as a result of the Galbraith report, is a personal friend. As the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley) will know, he is now a Conservative council councillor, and is the former chairman of the Ryedale Conservative Association.

However, it is fair, from the point of view of balance, to place on record the fact that the criticism of Mr. Naylor in the Galbraith report was small. In relation to some of the other difficulties that the health service has encountered in recent years, this problem, important though it is, is by no means on the same scale.

In my view, nothing in the report justifies Mr. Naylor's resignation. However, in resigning from the trust, he took an honourable course, and acted with great speed and integrity. I can advise the House that he did so after much soul searching about what was best for the North Yorkshire ambulance service. He felt that, as the report contained criticism of him, the right, proper and honourable thing to do was to tender his resignation, and that he did.

The Galbraith report came about as a result of a "Dispatches" programme on Channel 4. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby made it clear that the report concluded that some of the most serious allegations in the programme were not justified. It is important that the House, the Minister and the people of North Yorkshire recognise that the serious allegation that response times had been deliberately manipulated was not found proven, although it was found that, in a marginal sense, they had been overestimated.

The allegation that defibrillators did not work and were not properly maintained has serious implications for the national picture. However, the Galbraith inquiry found that not to be the case, although the report implied that this is a national problem, and that defibrillator equipment should be upgraded across the ambulance service.

It was those two key allegations in the Channel 4 programme that most shocked the people of North Yorkshire, and gave rise to the greatest degree of public concern. Time does not allow an in-depth analysis of other aspects of the report, except to say that it acknowledges that the ambulance service has made substantial progress, and that considerable improvements have been made in the four years since the trust was established.

After the Channel 4 programme, I visited the two ambulance stations at Malton and Filey in my constituency. I had a completely open mind, and gave ambulance crews and staff the opportunity to say precisely what they thought: that is particularly important, given the allegations of bullying of members of staff by the former chief executive, Mr. King, who the report acknowledges had an extremely robust style of management. They told me that the trust had brought about improvements, but that issues in the report still concerned them. That is undoubtedly the case.

I conclude by making two points. First, I want to pick up on the point made by the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby about the future of the North Yorkshire ambulance service. It concerns me greatly that people in the NHS executive and in the Yorkshire and Humberside regional office may seize on this report and these events and use them as an excuse to merge the North Yorkshire ambulance trust with another trust, such as Humberside or West Yorkshire, or to merge all three.

I think that I can speak for my colleagues in North Yorkshire—judging from what the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby said, Labour Members share my view—when I say that the case has not been made for such a merger. North Yorkshire is by far and away England's largest county. I know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you represent a large rural area in Suffolk, but when one considers that the distance from the border with the North sea in my constituency and that of the hon. Gentleman to the most westerly part of North Yorkshire is greater than the distance from Southend to Bristol, one can understand our concern that there would be serious logistical difficulties in forcing through a merger. There should be a proper public debate about this issue.

I do not believe that there is support for a merger in the York area. I know that it is difficult, because of his position, for the hon. Member for City of York to participate in the debate, but I am sure that he would agree with me that people in the York area, which we both represent, would be very concerned if, in spite of the problems that have been experienced, the ambulance headquarters at Skelton on the edge of York were to be closed and operations and decision making transferred to Hull or Leeds. That would be a seriously retrograde step.

The second point that I want to make is very much along the same lines. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby referred to an accident on the A64, and the difficulty of the response time. The problem is that there is no ambulance station between Malton and Scarborough or Filey. It takes me 38 minutes to drive from my office, which is half a mile from the Malton ambulance station, to the next ambulance station at Filey; and that is on a good day. On a Saturday in June, July or August, when the A64 is chock-full with traffic, it takes easily an hour to do that journey. The hon. Gentleman knows what the problem is, because he lives in Scarborough.

If we are to impose on the ambulance service the 19-minute national response requirement, some regard must be given to the problems of dealing with such a huge rural area. That is the message that I received from ambulance crews. They say to me, "Mr. Greenway, it is all very well people complaining that it took 35, 40 or 45 minutes, as in one of the incidents in the Channel 4 programme, but people should try driving some of these distances in their own cars."

I am not making a plea for another ambulance station, but I hope that the Minister will study this problem and the difficulty associated with covering the area with communications systems and radios. There are several fire stations and other police premises between those ambulance stations, but there is no ambulance station between Malton and Filey or Scarborough. That is a huge distance to cover, and there are other problems in similar parts of North Yorkshire.

When we consider the difficulties that the ambulance trust and the ambulance service in North Yorkshire have faced in recent months, we should recognise that, by and large, they do an extremely good job, and that the people of North Yorkshire have a high regard for them.

1.48 pm

The Minister of State for Public Health (Ms Tessa Jowell): I am glad to have the opportunity to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn), and I congratulate him on securing a debate on a matter of such importance to his constituents. I listened carefully to him, and to the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway). They expressed important concerns about the North Yorkshire ambulance service trust. My hon. Friend is right to pursue his concerns with great vigour on behalf of his constituents.

My hon. Friend outlined clearly the background to the independent review and the recent report. I should like to make it clear that, although the report was commissioned and the inquiry panel established under the previous

[Ms Tessa Jowell]

Administration, panel members were appointed jointly with the National Health Service Executive regional office.

When it first sat, the panel amended and extended the terms of reference initially suggested for it by the trust. It is, however, important for us to look forward. We should take account of the lessons that can be learned, both in north Yorkshire and by the ambulance service regionally and throughout the country, from what was a series of disturbing incidents. What matters is the allaying of public concern—which is great, following events such as the one that we have been discussing—and the rebuilding of public confidence.

As my hon. Friend said, the independent review panel was chaired by Anne Galbraith, chair of the Newcastle Royal Victoria Infirmary and Associated Hospitals NHS trust. It was formally appointed on 25 November last year, and undertook to investigate nine of the areas of concern that were identified by the "Dispatches" programme and in other charges.

There were allegations of deliberate manipulation of response times. There was a demand for justification of the trust's decision to purchase a new control and communications system. It was alleged that the trust was in arrears with its paramedic training and reassessment programme, owing to a failure to invest in proper training; that it had failed to replace its defibrillators because of a lack of investment, and that that might have caused defibrillators to fail; and that, owing to a lack of investment in radio infrastructure, the low level of radio coverage in parts of the operational area had caused ambulances to be delayed.

It was asked whether line management relationships had affected the trust's operational effectiveness, whether non-executive directors had been kept appropriately informed, and whether the trust's approach to income generation had affected its operational effectiveness. It was also asked whether the trust had committed expenditure to public relations at the expense of operational services, and—specifically in relation to the tragic case of James Dean—whether it had applied any of the lessons that it had learned in practice.

Submissions to the review were invited from staff and former staff of the trust, the trust board and external organisations and individuals, including Members of Parliament. The panel conducted what was described as a thorough investigation of the technical and managerial issues raised by its terms of reference, and sought from the outset to gather comprehensive information about the trust's performance.

Time was spent in discussion with a wide range of individuals and groups, and consultation was undertaken with both the trust board and union representatives. The report was published in full on 3 June 1997, just over six months after the screening of "Dispatches". Having looked at the programme of work, and following meetings, the panel set about its task with commendable urgency.

Let me now deal with the criticisms of the trust that were made in the report, and inform my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Ryedale of the action being taken in response to those criticisms. The public, after all, have a right to expect problems that have been identified to be resolved swiftly. The North Yorkshire ambulance service is now under a new management team, which is tackling the urgent need to improve performance.

Let me make it clear that I am here to report on the findings of the review panel, and on steps taken by the NHS executive in the light of those findings. It is for public opinion, articulated by local Members of Parliament, to judge whether enough has yet been done.

In the light of today's debate, and having listened carefully to what was said by my hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman, I shall ask the regional office to prepare a set of clear performance targets that the ambulance trust will be expected to meet. I hope that those targets will be widely disseminated, as will the extent to which they are met, as part of the important process of rebuilding public trust and confidence in the service.

A number of criticisms were made of the trust's management. The hon. Member for Ryedale referred to what was described as the harsh, arbitrary and inflexible leadership style that had had an impact on the trust's operational effectiveness. I understand that the chief executive who was the source of that complaint has now retired on grounds of ill health—that was mentioned by my hon. Friend—and that the chairman has also resigned. Indeed, I acknowledged his resignation only a few days ago.

I am told that staff consultation arrangements have been overhauled by the new management team. A number of groups of staff have been organised to review the trust's policies on such matters as disciplinary and grievance procedures, and health and safety matters. The trust plans to introduce an "investors in people" award, which we hope will ensure the effective involvement of staff in the running of the service. Staff side representatives have publicly recorded their view that morale has improved, and that the new management team is working effectively with staff. I hope that that will translate rapidly into improved performance by the service.

Many criticisms were made, and the responses to them are clearly set out in the report—to which I refer hon. Members who are interested. The public will be concerned about, for instance, the trust's alleged failure to deal separately with income generation calls and emergency calls, fearing that that may have interfered with operational efficiency. I understand that the trust acted swiftly to separate those very different types of call immediately after the "Dispatches" programme, and that careful monitoring of them is now under way. I also understand that further training has been secured for paramedics, and that two additional instructor posts are being advertised to meet future training requirements.

Let me refer to one of the gravest allegations, relating to the collection of performance statistics on ambulance response times. The review panel found no evidence of systematic falsification of results, but the panel felt that access to computer records was insufficiently controlled, and left the trust open to allegations of manipulation of the data collected. Having read the report carefully, I can confirm that view. I am told that the trust has taken steps to address the panel's concern, including the monitoring of the use of the system on a continuing basis to ensure data integrity.

In many respects, the best judges of whether the service has learnt the lessons of the James Dean case are James Dean's family, and I hope that they will be kept in close

touch with the way in which what has been learned from his tragic death is being applied in practice. The trust now has a new acting chairman and a new acting chief executive. I assure my hon. Friend that developments in the trust will be kept under the closest scrutiny by the regional office, which will also be asked to establish the performance benchmarks to which I referred earlier.

Questions were raised about concern about merger proposals. I can confirm that no formal proposals have been received by me, or by the regional office. New appointments to the trust board will, of course, follow full Nolan procedures in relation to openness.

What matters now is rebuilding confidence, and applying the lessons learned from a bad episode to ambulance services throughout the country. The constituents of my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Ryedale deserve an ambulance service that truly meets the highest demands placed on ambulance services to respond to emergencies. I will ensure that the Government make every effort to make certain that that happens.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LEVER PARK BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 1 July.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Group Enterprises

1. **Mr. Love:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development in what ways her Department has been supporting co–operatives and other forms of group enterprise through overseas aid; and what new initiatives are planned. [3850]

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): I am sure that my hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that we are actively encouraging the creation of co-operatives, especially to manage a communal resource, share risk, or increase the power of individuals in the market. We are seeking new opportunities to support the co-operative ideal, for example through micro-finance schemes. I recently met the president of the International Co-operative Alliance to discuss how we can learn from experience in other countries.

Mr. Love: I thank the Minister for his helpful reply. I welcome the Government's support for the ethos of co-operation. Does my hon. Friend agree that co-operatives are people-centred organisations that are able to balance the need to make a profit with the social objectives of their members? If he does, will he take the opportunity to reverse the considerable decline in recent years of support for co-operatives by the previous Government? As part of that process, will he enter into dialogue with co-operative organisations both nationally and internationally to help him to achieve the Government's objectives for the third world?

Mr. Foulkes: My hon. Friend is right. Co-ops balance profit-seeking with social goals. As I have said, we met the president of the ICA and I also plan to discuss development with the Co-operative college in Loughborough and with the Plunkett Foundation in Oxford. Co-ops represent a good middle way between centralised state control and free market idolatry, and we shall do all that we can to encourage them.

Mr. Rowe: Is the Minister aware of organisations, such as the Australian-based Maranatha group, which make small loans to small companies? Is he further aware that such loan-making companies have an extraordinary repayment record, which is sometimes as high as 85 or 90 per cent? Will he do everything in his power to encourage that kind of highly cost-effective assistance?

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his positive encouragement. It is not often that we get that from the Opposition. He gives a good example, and there is also the example of the Grameen bank in Bangladesh, which has had good repayment, especially by women who have been given small loans. That is exactly the kind of thing that we shall encourage, because it will encourage the development of the poorest of the poor.

World Bank

2. **Dr. Lynne Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had about the operations of the World bank. [3856]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): Since 1 May, I have met Mr. James Wolfensohn twice and had useful discussions about how the bank can focus more effectively on poverty eradication.

Dr. Jones: My right hon. Friend has already made it clear that she intends that the elimination of poverty rather than political and economic considerations must be at the heart of our aid programme. I am sure that she realises that that can only be achieved wholly if the World bank has a similar shift in its priorities. I am glad to hear that my right hon. Friend discussed that with Mr. Wolfensohn. Did she also press him on the need for the World bank to be more accountable and transparent, particularly in relation to the publication of the voting records of member nations?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right. We want to get everyone in the world and all the major institutions to sign up to the recommended policy of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's assistance committee that world poverty should be halved by 2015. That is achievable if all the world's major institutions co-operate, and the World bank is the key to that. James Wolfensohn is clearly in favour of greater transparency and I favour the World bank's country plans being openly published in the country, so that everyone who lives there knows what the World bank's strategy is. Open publishing of voting records is a more complex and difficult question because it might stultify the debate. We need more discussion about whether open publishing would be helpful.

Dr. Fox: If the international financial institutions continue to drag their feet over the highly indebted poor countries initiative, will the Government make money available unilaterally to kick start the process?

Clare Short: As the hon. Gentleman knows and as we discussed during our previous Question Time, the British Government—his own and this one—have been firmly in the lead on the HIPC initiative in trying to achieve debt forgiveness, and he will also know that Britain has written off all its bilateral debt to 17 of the poorest countries in Africa. The problems are not with the World bank, but with the International Monetary Fund and with some of the member countries. We are doing everything in our power to apply all sorts of pressure and to mobilise public opinion to achieve much faster progress on the implementation of the HIPC initiative.

Tibet

4. **Dr. Tonge:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement regarding United Kingdom aid to Tibet. [3858]

Mr. Foulkes: We believe that we can best assist the people of Tibet through small-scale projects that respond

directly to the needs of local communities. Since the financial year 1995-96, we have allocated about three quarters of a million pounds through non-governmental organisations to a variety of projects, both in Tibet and for Tibetans living in Sichuan and India.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the Minister for his reply. I am sure that he realises that, over recent years, a million people have died in Tibet and that 60 per cent. of its population are now Chinese. That is due to the actions of the Chinese Government, who have had a very repressive regime in Tibet since 1949. What steps does he intend to take to ensure that aid is not used unwisely by the Chinese occupiers of Tibet? While he is answering that question, perhaps he would like to extend his thoughts to the actions of the Indonesian Government in East Timor, where British aid is still going. They are denying the people of East Timor—

Madam Speaker: Order. One question at a time. The question relates to Tibet. The Minister will answer on Tibet.

Mr. Foulkes: If the hon. Lady wants to table another question on Indonesia, we would be happy to answer that as well.

Our policy on Tibet is also a matter of concern for the Foreign Office, but I assure the hon. Lady that the £750,000 to which I referred earlier goes through non-governmental organisations such as Save the Children Fund, directly to help poor people in Tibet. The Government are concerned about human rights in the whole of China, including Tibet, and we shall continue to raise our concerns directly with the Government of China, both bilaterally and in international forums.

Mr. Wilkinson: I welcome the amount of money dispersed through NGOs to Tibet, but will Her Majesty's Government address the problem of the non-co-operation of the People's Republic of China with regard to developmental aid from Governments, specifically allocated for Tibet? Is the Minister prepared to put pressure on the Chinese authorities to relax their attitude, which is viewed in the outside world as largely negative with regard to Tibet?

Mr. Foulkes: We certainly believe that any money that is allocated for Tibet must be spent in Tibet. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the Pa Nam rural development project is being supported by the European Union. Through our membership of the EU's Development Council, we shall be ensuring that that money is spent properly, for the purpose for which it was intended.

Mr. Stevenson: I recognise the importance of the project to which my hon. Friend has just referred, but I am sure that he will recognise the considerable controversy surrounding it. Will my hon. Friend ensure that, when efforts are made to direct aid to the benefit of the Tibetan people and local projects, some mechanism is established whereby the Tibetan people can be consulted on what is required in their areas?

Mr. Foulkes: We certainly believe that, in the Chinese provinces and Tibet, the Tibetan people should be consulted about the expenditure of aid money that is allocated by the EU and the UK.

Bilateral Aid

5. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to increase the proportion of the aid budget spent on bilateral aid. [3859]

Clare Short: As the hon. Gentleman will know, or should know, the previous Government made an agreement that led to 40 per cent. of our expenditure being channelled through the EU. A further 15 per cent. of our expenditure meets our UN and World bank obligations.

Mr. Luff: I am sure that the right hon. Lady will be aware of the warm welcome across the House for the Prime Minister's statement yesterday about the new priority for aid to sub-Saharan Africa, but does she agree that her ability to reprioritise spending within her Department is limited by the high volume of multilateral aid? I accept the figures that she gave in her answer. Does she understand that any effort that she makes to repatriate responsibility for the aid programme from the EU to her Department will be widely welcome around the House?

Clare Short: It does not help to moan about what the previous Government did. Given that the commitment carries through to 1999, it is important that we improve the quality of the EU programme, which at the moment is patchy. Some of it is good and some of it much less good. A report of the development assistance committee of the OECD is quite critical. As part of our presidency of the EU, we have made it clear that improving the quality of EU performance and getting more collaboration between nation states and the EU rather than competition will improve the quality of our development strategy.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I recognise the distinction between aid and trade provision and tied aid under the bilateral programme, but can we have an assurance that ATP is fully protected?

Clare Short: I made it clear during our previous Question Time—I do not know whether my hon. Friend was present—that we are reviewing the aid and trade provision. There is much evidence that it is neither developmentally nor commercially beneficial. That review is under way, and we shall make an announcement when it is complete.

Mr. Goodlad: I add my personal congratulations and good wishes to the Secretary of State on her appointment.

Can the right hon. Lady confirm or deny reports that it is her intention to end the tying of any bilateral aid to the provision of British goods and services? What studies has she made of the likely effect of such a move on British jobs?

Clare Short: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks and welcome him to the Opposition Front Bench to serve what is probably the most noble cause that one can serve in politics.

As I have said, we have already made it clear that we are reviewing the aid and trade provision. The Prime Minister's announcement at the Denver summit is part of a worldwide movement to untie aid, because the OECD and everyone else recommends that there should be a change, as the

present system is basically inefficient. The number of British jobs that may be affected is marginal, but I am sure that Conservative Members would not want to featherbed the inefficiency of British companies by a sort of backward-looking tying of minor parts of the aid programme, when all the evidence and research undertaken by my Department and the OECD shows that it encourages inefficiency and damages the developmental quality of aid projects.

Land Mines

6. **Mr. Martin Bell:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will assess the advantages of promoting the development of new technologies for clearing land mines as a form of aid for those countries which need them. [3860]

Mr. Foulkes: I pay tribute to all that the hon. Gentleman has done to raise awareness on this issue. We support projects providing low-cost mechanical clearance and we are considering a number of new initiatives, from sophisticated multi-sensors to simple clearance tools.

Mr. Bell: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the issue here is not party political or political but humanitarian, and that an honoured guest should be allowed to visit an all-party group of the House without being accused of having political motives?

Mr. Foulkes: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The issue is humanitarian, not party political. Indeed, some Conservative Members of both Houses have been involved in the all-party group on land mine eradication, and the royal family has previously been involved with humanitarian issues. Diana, Princess of Wales, has helped to raise the profile of the problem, and it is entirely regrettable that she has had to withdraw because of pressure from Conservative Members.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: Does the Minister agree that the support of prominent public figures, either inside or outside the Palace of Westminster, is as nothing compared to the need to establish international political will to deal with the problem of land mines? I congratulate the Government on joining the Ottawa initiative, but will the Minister say whether the problem of land mines will be put on the agenda on the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting to be held in Edinburgh? Would that not be a suitable forum in which to initiate further international action?

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman, for whom I have great respect, for his kind congratulations on our participation in the Ottawa process. We shall take an active part in the forthcoming meetings, and we hope that we can get an agreement that will introduce an effective international ban on land mines. As for CHOGM, I understand that the agenda is not yet finalised, but we shall take account of what has been suggested and feed it into the considerations.

7. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking to encourage a more rapid clearance of land mines in the poorest countries of the world. [3861]

9. **Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking to encourage a more rapid clearance of land mines in the poorest countries of the world. [3863]

Clare Short: We are tackling the problem on several fronts—first, as has been said, by seeking an effective international ban on their use and secondly, by supporting the development of capacity in heavily mined countries to clear their own mines. Only that will give us the speed of clearance necessary because, at current rates of clearance, it would take the world 1,000 years to clear the mines already in place—and more are being laid as we speak. Our priorities are to save lives and to ensure resettlement and development for the poor in heavily mined countries.

Dr. Godman: I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend on signing the Ottawa initiative.

Has the role of the United Nations in international mine clearance operations been diminished by the funding crisis that is bedevilling that organisation? When President Mary Robinson demits office and takes up the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights, will she have a role to play in that scheme of things?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We all welcome the appointment of the President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, as Commissioner for Human Rights, although I am not sure whether she will have responsibility for land mine clearance in the UN system.

My hon. Friend is right to say that many forces have been trying to undermine the effectiveness of the UN. The view taken by the British Government was welcomed by everyone at the recent meeting of the UN from which I returned last night. Our position is strongly to support the UN process of reform, which will increase its effectiveness. Many countries in the UN greatly welcome the new responsible and creative British position.

Dr. Starkey: I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State on her initiatives, which are welcomed by most of my constituents in Milton Keynes. Given the enormous number of countries affected by the serious problem of indiscriminate land mines, what criteria will her Department use to identify the countries to be helped first?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. As she probably knows, some 60 countries have been very badly disabled by land mines, which are wicked weapons. People are damaged by them not only during war, including civil war, but even when peace comes, because there can be no resettlement and land cannot be used. Adults looking for wood or children playing can still be badly damaged. We want to support worldwide movements for eradication.

I stress that we need technical co-operation to create the capacity for the countries concerned to clear their own mines. I visited Cambodia about six months ago and saw

widows and amputees clearing mines there. That provided them with a living and helped to heal the damage done to their country. We want to encourage that kind of work.

Fair Trade Products

8. **Mrs. Heal:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to support fair trade products. [3862]

Clare Short: I believe that the growth of ethical movements among consumers, investors and producers is a beneficial force for change. My Department is working with the ethical movements with a view to agreeing international codes for ethical trading. It is clear that ethical business is good business in every sense.

Mrs. Heal: There is growing concern among consumers in developed countries about the conditions of workers who produce agricultural and manufactured goods for export. Research by Christian Aid has shown some of the difficulties that many agricultural workers in developing countries face, including low pay, pesticide abuse, violence and the lack of trade union rights. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to introduce and monitor a code of conduct for workers in developing countries?

Clare Short: I share my hon. Friend's concern and support for the valuable work that Christian Aid has done. The response throughout the country has been magnificent. People were asked to tell their supermarkets that they wanted them to purchase ethically. All the major supermarkets are in talks about how to do so. That could make an enormous difference to the standards of employment for workers and to the prevalence of the abuse of pesticides, which damages our food and the health of the workers. My Department strongly supports all those movements. We are in favour of the monitoring of codes of conduct, and we want them picked up and entrenched internationally.

Mr. Blunt: Will the Secretary of State confirm that she understands that fair trade is often code for protectionism and that the fastest way to ensure that the poorest parts of the world have access to the wealth that the rest of the developed world enjoys is free trade? Does she understand that basic requirement?

Clare Short: What a sad comment. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman knows nothing of the fair trade movement that is influencing the citizens of this country, if not his party—which might explain the Conservatives' current position. Fair trade is about people wanting to consume goods that have been ethically produced in a free trading system. It is about consumers using their purchasing power to get goods that have been produced under fair employment conditions and without pesticides being used. Those movements are growing and strengthening throughout Britain. The hon. Gentleman is out of tune with the mood of the country.

Employee Share Ownership

10. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will encourage the growth of employee share ownership plans as a contribution to economic policy in developing countries. [3864]

Mr. Foulkes: We are already supporting employee share ownership plans in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and will certainly encourage their consideration in developing countries as one of the range of options available for the ownership of assets.

Mr. MacShane: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. He will be aware that developing countries and the ex-communist states are trying to develop a market economy without capital and without capitalists. As, in a sense, we are all capitalists now, do not employee share ownership schemes offer a third way between the excess of the plc and the nonsense of state control? Will he continue to encourage them as part of his Department's economic thinking?

Mr. Foulkes: I agree with most of what my hon. Friend said. He will know that the benefits of ESOPs include increased work effort from employee share holders, better communication between workers and managers and less conflictive decision making. It might be a good structure for the parliamentary Conservative party.

Development Projects (Private Sector)

11. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to encourage the private sector to become more involved with the support of development projects. [3865]

Clare Short: I want my Department to work in partnership with all those who can contribute to development and the eradication of poverty. That includes the private sector, of course. I shall be setting out my thinking in a speech at the Institute of Directors on 8 July and wish to encourage the private sector to work more closely with my Department, to encourage more investment in the world's poorest countries.

Mr. Sheerman: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. She will know that, like so many Labour Members, I am very much in favour of a greater contribution from our revenues to development aid, but the private sector can play an important part in development, and where best practice exists it is very good indeed. I hope that my right hon. Friend will encourage more firms that trade with, and do well out of exports to, developing countries to become involved in local projects. I have seen that such projects are extremely effective in south America. I know that they are effective in some parts of Africa. I hope that my right hon. Friend will do everything that she can to stimulate that involvement and work on best practice.

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is right. In order to grow, the poorest countries need investment from the private sector. At present, private sector flows are concentrated in the 10 most developed of the under-developed countries. We must improve on that. The Commonwealth

Development Corporation, for which my Department provides support, does valuable work in that direction, but we are also keen to work with partner countries and with companies in Britain to develop the conditions to encourage more investment in the poorest countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

Mr. Fabricant: Is the right hon. Lady aware of all the valuable work done by the private water companies in developing water projects in sub-Saharan Africa? What assessment has her Department made of the effect on that form of aid of the introduction of the iniquitous windfall tax by her Government?

Clare Short: As I said to one of the hon. Gentleman's hon. Friends at the last International Development questions, these matters are too serious for cheap political points. I am not aware of any work done by private water companies in Africa.

Mr. Fabricant: What?

Clare Short: I am not especially aware of that work, but if they are doing it, that is good work. Some 25 million—

Mr. Fabricant: Read your brief.

Clare Short: Why does the hon. Gentleman not listen? This is not a political game but a serious matter that affects the lives of human beings.

Some 25 million people a year die as a result of water-borne illnesses. There is a movement for an international conference that is likely to set the world a target of bringing clean water and sanitation to everyone in the world within 10 years. Everyone will have to work at that, but private companies alone will not do it, I am afraid.

Mr. Dafis: Will the Minister agree to look into the multilateral agreement on investment currently being negotiated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development? Does she agree that it will involve a significant shift of power away from Governments—many of them democratic—to trans-national corporations and make it more difficult for those Governments to develop policies in relation to social and environmental objectives? Is not the agreement likely to be contrary to the spirit of sustainable development and Earth summit 2? Will the Government look into this and do something about it?

Clare Short: As the hon. Gentleman may know, I came back overnight from the Earth summit in New York. The matter was raised with me by some of the non-governmental organisations there. I promised to take advice on the matter and saw one of my officials this morning, who promised me a paper later today. I shall look into the matter. My Department is not the lead Department on that issue. I do not believe that the agreement is the apocalypse that has been suggested in some quarters, but I shall look into it and write to the hon. Gentleman.

UNESCO

12. **Miss Anne Begg:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what consultations she has had on the renewal of United Kingdom membership of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. [3866]

Clare Short: I met Mr. Mayor, UNESCO's director-general, in London on 2 June. I shall follow this up with a visit to UNESCO next Tuesday. I shall attend, along with United Kingdom staff, the raising of the Union Jack once again outside the UNESCO building.

Miss Begg: On what date shall we be rejoining UNESCO and, once we do so, what will Britain's priority be in that organisation?

Clare Short: Our renewed membership takes effect from 1 July, the day on which the Union flag will be rehoisted. I have already had talks with the director-general. Our additional funding in the first year will be spent on one of our overwhelming priorities—bringing primary education to all children in the world, especially girls. Educating girls is the most developmental thing that one can do. UNESCO will prioritise that work as part of its welcome of Britain back into the organisation.

Mr. Wells: I congratulate the right hon. Lady on Britain's return to UNESCO, but how will she compensate the bilateral aid budget for the £12 million that she will have to spend in that organisation for our membership?

Clare Short: It is actually £5 million this year. As I have said, that money will be spent on work that we absolutely support: getting all the children of the world into primary education is one of the most important developmental things that we will do. The money for this year will come out of the contingency reserve. The implication of the hon. Gentleman's remarks is that any money that we spend in the World bank or on United Nations' work is not beneficial, but that is not so. We must ensure that that money is spent to serve our aim to eradicate poverty in the world.

Development Issues (Public Information)

13. **Mr. Hope:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with non-governmental organisations on educating the public about development issues. [3867]

Clare Short: I am reviewing the Department's communications so that we can increase public understanding and support for our strategies for poverty elimination. I intend to consult widely on the forthcoming White Paper, which the House will debate on Tuesday.

Mr. Hope: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Is she aware that the global youthwork advisory service is to be launched next week in the House of Commons? Does she agree that it is important to raise young people's

awareness of the globalised world and its effect on their lives, and of how their choices and behaviour affect the world around them?

Clare Short: I agree with my hon. Friend completely. When I visit schools and colleges I find that such global issues concern young people more than any other political issue. As I keep saying, the reality is that we could halve world poverty by 2015 if we all worked at it. We must get everyone committed to that aim and make people optimistic about what can be achieved. Young people can give the lead on that, and we want to work with them to ensure that they do.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Q1. **Mr. Dennis Turner:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 25 June. [3885]

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. I also met Margaret Gibney, the young schoolgirl from Belfast.

Mr. Turner: I was wondering whether my right hon. Friend has had an opportunity yet to study my Weights and Measures (Beer and Cider) Bill? It is an important consumer measure for millions of beer drinkers in Britain. I can advise my right hon. Friend that what beer drinkers want is a full pint of beer with the froth on top.

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend, as chairman of Bilston Springvale club, always gives good value for money. I thoroughly applaud his campaign to make sure that the British pint is a good, honest pint.

Mr. Hague: I agree with the Prime Minister about that.

When the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) says that he was threatened with expulsion from the Labour party if he campaigned against a Welsh Assembly in the forthcoming referendum and the Secretary of State of Wales denies that, which one is telling the truth?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman, and I again welcome him to the Dispatch Box, that no one has been threatened with expulsion. People are perfectly entitled to state their position, provided, of course, that they do so in accordance with the rules of the parliamentary party.

Mr. Hague: So let the whole House get it clear: when the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent says that he was told twice that he would be kicked out of the Labour party if he stood for beliefs, we have the Prime Minister's personal assurance that he was not telling the truth.

The Prime Minister: I can give my personal assurance that no such threat was made.

Mr. Hague: In that case, who authorised Mr. Huw Roberts—a special adviser at the Welsh Office—to tell local council officials that their relationship with the Welsh Office would be jeopardised if their local Member of Parliament did not support the policy of the Labour party? Do not local council officials have a higher responsibility to the wider electorate, and not to the unity of the Labour party?

The Prime Minister: That is absolutely right. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that I have asked for an investigation into this matter, and I am told—*[Interruption.]* If hon. Members would just wait a minute. I am told that that allegation is untrue as well, so perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will now withdraw it.

Mr. Hague: The whole House will hope that it is untrue and the whole House will look forward to seeing the result of the investigation in due course. Just so we have this absolutely clear, when the Secretary of State for Wales tells *The Daily Telegraph* that individuals in the Labour party must not flout the party election manifesto, but the Secretary of State for Scotland tells the House, as he did a few weeks ago, that any Member of Parliament has a right to speak his or her mind as he sees fit, which one is speaking for the Government?

The Prime Minister: I have just made it clear—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Perhaps I will make it clear again. One: Members of Parliament are perfectly entitled to speak their mind. Two: there is no truth in the allegation that pressure was put on councils or that they had been told that they could not have the resources or any of the rest of it. If that were the case, it would be quite wrong. It is not the case, and perhaps now the right hon. Gentleman will withdraw the allegation.

Mr. Hague: Will the Prime Minister therefore—

Hon. Members: Withdraw.

Madam Speaker: Order. The House will come to order.

Mr. Hague: Will the Prime Minister therefore give us a cast-iron guarantee that he will come to the House with the result of that investigation? Does he not regard it as an extraordinary state of affairs that different Cabinet Ministers give conflicting views on this matter and that investigations into it have to be mounted? What will he do to stop the arrogant behaviour of his Government on these matters and to ensure that there is an honest and open debate?

The Prime Minister: Unfortunately, and I understand these problems, I think that the right hon. Gentleman prepared his last question before he heard the answer. I have just made it clear that I investigated the matter this morning. There is no truth in these allegations. People are perfectly entitled to speak their mind. They are entitled to do that and that has been made clear by everyone concerned. It is important that we now get on and debate the principles that underlie the devolution debate. I can only say to the right hon. Gentleman that, if he carries on with points like this, no wonder he has no Members of Parliament left in Wales or Scotland.

Q2. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that an effective partnership between

Government and industry is essential if we are to get our young people off the dole and into work? Can he assure the House that the business community is delivering practical support for the Government's welfare-to-work programme? [3886]

The Prime Minister: I can indeed confirm that that is the case. We are absolutely delighted at the response we have already received from the private sector in respect of the welfare-to-work plans. The fact that there are so many public companies that are prepared to come forward and make a commitment to taking young people who are unemployed off the dole and giving them proper skills and education, with the chance then to get into a decent job, is a very great tribute to the British sense of social responsibility and to our companies in particular.

Mr. Ashdown: Does the Prime Minister accept that there remains, I fear, some confusion as to whether the Government will permit the transfer of funds from one Department to another to solve the coming winter crisis in health and education? The Sunday newspapers, quoting a Government source in Denver, said that they would, but the BBC, quoting the Chancellor on Monday, said that they would not. Which is Government policy?

The Prime Minister: This is our continuing debate at Prime Minister's Question Time. As I have said on many occasions, the position is the same as it has always been. The overall control totals must be kept within; the departmental spending limits are there and for these two years will be kept within. As the Chancellor said, of course—as we said in our manifesto—if social security can be reduced, it will be possible to spend more money on education. As I said to the right hon. Gentleman last week, if, in theory, there were a great pot of money that could be used, that would be fine, but there is not; that is the problem. We have had to take those tough spending limits precisely because of the position that we have inherited.

Mr. Ashdown: The Prime Minister's respect is reciprocated, but the question remains and I fear that it remains unanswered. Will the departmental ceilings, such as that on the distribution of the contingency reserve, be allowed to increase?

Let me explain to the Prime Minister why that is so important. Waiting lists are getting longer again. The number of emergency operations that have been cancelled at the last minute is increasing again. The hospital trusts are £300 million, and more, in debt, and sinking further into debt at the rate of £1 million a day. If something is not done about that, there will be mayhem in the NHS this winter, and the longer it is left, the worse it will get.

Hon. Members: Oh.

The Prime Minister: I entirely understand the problems that there are in the health service and in our education service. I do not think that Conservative Members should be shouting about that; they created those problems. We must do the best we can within the overall limits of public finance, because of the enormous debt burden that we have inherited and the need to take tough action. We simply cannot avoid that, but within those limits we shall do what we can.

Q3. **Mr. Mullin:** Will the Prime Minister confirm that it remains his intention within the lifetime of this Parliament to deprive hereditary peers of their voting rights; if it is his intention, does he agree that the Wild Animals (Hunting with Dogs) Bill, recently introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster) to ban hunting with hounds, provides us with a welcome opportunity to deal with two mediaeval relics at the same time—hereditary peers and fox hunters, on territory on which we have overwhelming public support? [3887]

The Prime Minister: It is our intention to remove the voting rights from hereditary peers in the House of Lords, and there will also be a free vote on fox hunting.

Mr. Hogg: If I may revert to the question that was asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), it is clear from what the right hon. Gentleman has said that it is not possible for both the Secretary of State for Wales and the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) to be correct. Either one or the other is correct. Why should we support the version of the Secretary of State for Wales? Is not the proper way forward to cause the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Gentleman to come to the House to make a personal statement, so that we may judge for ourselves?

The Prime Minister: As I have tried to explain to the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks, when I read about these reports, correctly guessing that they might be raised at Question Time, I asked my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales about that, and I have given the assurance that I have given the House.

Q4. **Dr. Lynne Jones:** The latest results for educational achievement at key stage 2 in Birmingham schools show a clear correlation between poor results and a high turnover in school populations. That is something that has bothered me ever since the year I discovered that, in my primary school, on an outer-city estate in Birmingham, only one child— [3888]

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has been here long enough to know that this is Question Time and we do not want a long preamble about her earlier life.

Dr. Jones: Only one child at year six had been in the school since the reception class. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the crusade to drive up standards in schools gives special attention to the needs of those schools in which the school population changes almost entirely over a three or four-year period, and to the causes of that problem?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the problems of schools when they have a large transient population. That is one of the issues that will be addressed in the education White Paper which will be published shortly. It is also important to realise that, in Birmingham, about 10,500 five, six and seven-year-olds are in classes of more than 30, thanks to what the previous Government did. Those are some of the issues that we shall address, and we shall address them urgently.

Mr. Salmond: Will the Prime Minister confirm or deny the report on the front page of *The Scotsman* that the Government are recasting the detail of the taxation

proposals for a Scottish Parliament? Will the right hon. Gentleman accept that, since the election, the Deputy Prime Minister has told us that the White Paper will be published after the referendum, the Prime Minister has told us that the devolution Bill will be published before the referendum, and the Prime Minister has also told us that sovereignty will reside in this place, not with the Scottish people? Now there is confusion over the tax-varying powers. Does the right hon. Gentleman understand why the people of Scotland are beginning to wonder whether his full enthusiasm and attention to detail are devoted to this subject?

The Prime Minister: First, the Minister of State has already denied those reports on the lunchtime news—I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman realises that. Secondly, there is absolutely no confusion about the devolution plans, and there is huge support for them in Scotland and elsewhere. That support would be increased if the hon. Gentleman's party finally came off the fence and supported them too.

Q5. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his magnificent speech on the environment in New York? Does he agree that human population pressures are a major factor in the degradation of the global environment, and that the way forward is to implement the action plan produced at the Cairo population development conference, at the heart of which was the idea that females' right to choose the size of their families is a most important feature in sustainable future growth? [3889]

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right in the concern that he raises. We fully support the Cairo programme for action. Indeed, we spend about £70 million a year on support for family planning and other measures. It is tremendously important to the future of the developing world.

Q6. **Mr. Spring:** Does the right hon. Gentleman share the view that the provision of nursery education by local education authorities should be without discrimination? Is he aware, however, that that is not the case in Suffolk, where nursery education is provided under the umbrella of the Labour-controlled county council's anti-poverty programme? May I tell the Prime Minister of the increasing concern of parents in Suffolk, who find that nursery education there is based on damaging nostrums of social engineering issuing from members of his party? [3890]

The Prime Minister: I do not know about the situation to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but if he looks at the record of Labour and Conservative councils throughout the country, he will find that the record of Labour authorities on nursery education is far superior to that of Conservative authorities.

Ms Ward: What are the Government's views on the recent publicity surrounding the launch of alcoholic icepops, following the controversy of the alcopops drinks and their influence on under-age drinkers? What action do the Government propose to take against those products?

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made clear, a working party has been established—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry that Conservative Members find this a matter for mirth: many parents are very worried about it. It is important that we work with the manufacturers and others to deal with the problem. I can assure my hon. Friend that that is precisely what we will do—without, it appears, the support of the Conservative Opposition.

Q7. **Mr. Burns:** Will the Prime Minister tell the House when and, more important, how the Government plan to keep their pre-election pledge to help a group of disadvantaged pensioners who are having to use their savings below the £16,000 maximum to pay for their own residential care? That is because Labour and Liberal Democrat-controlled Sefton council refuses to accept the will of the House and says that, until these pensioners' savings have fallen to £1,500, they will have to pay for themselves. [3891]

The Prime Minister: I really am surprised that a Conservative Member has the nerve to raise that matter. Many elderly people have difficulties with community care and paying nursing home costs precisely because of the problems left by the last Conservative Government. This Government are trying to deal with those problems.

Mr. Skinner: I just want to prove the theory that somebody on this side is allowed to speak his mind. Now that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has discovered a great big black hole in the country's finances arising out of the fiddles that the last Tory Government carried out, will my right hon. Friend reflect on the fact that, come next Wednesday, we shall have a great opportunity to find additional revenue to fill the black hole created by that lousy, rotten Government? We can then ensure that we have more money for the health service, for education and for doing many of the things that we need to do in order to continue to win power again.

The Prime Minister: The decisions on the Budget will have to await the Chancellor of the Exchequer next week, but I certainly agree with what my hon. Friend says about the mess left by the last Conservative Government. I do not know whether this worries him more than me, but I find myself increasingly in agreement with him on many issues.

Ministerial Visits

Q8. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Prime Minister when he next plans to visit the Lewes constituency. [3892]

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to visit that constituency, but I shall certainly do so when I can.

Mr. Baker: I am sorry that the Prime Minister does not plan to visit Lewes, but if he were to speak to my constituents he would find that the three priorities that have been identified are the same as those in Bolsover—investment in health, investment in education and more police on the beat. Can he help to solve a problem for my constituents, who want to know why the Government are committed to cutting tax for those at the top of our society by introducing a starting rate? Would it not be fairer and

provide more than £1 billion if he increased the top-rate tax to 50p in the pound for the 1 per cent. who did well under the Tory Government? That would release £1 billion for health, education and law and order. Is it more important for the Prime Minister to featherbed the top 1 per cent. than to provide decent public services for everybody else?

The Prime Minister: First, as the hon. Gentleman knows, it is not our policy to raise the top rate of tax, but the 10p starting rate of tax would help many low-income families. Many of those low-income families often face high marginal rates of tax—sometimes 80 or 90 per cent., and sometimes even over 100 per cent. As the top marginal tax rates have come down, we believe that it is right and just to try to reduce the marginal rates of tax at the bottom end. That is the reason for that.

On funding programmes, I hope that the Liberal Democrat party will review its opposition to the windfall tax, which is entirely fair and absolutely right, and could help many young people to find the jobs and education that they need.

Engagements

Q9. **Mr. Thompson:** As the Prime Minister basks in his great mandate for the Labour party, has he noticed the proportionally greater mandate received by the Unionist party in Northern Ireland, where we received 13 seats out of 18 and more than 50 per cent. of the votes? It is a mandate opposed to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, opposed to the framework document and opposed to sitting down with IRA-Sinn Fein with guns on the table, under the table and outside the door. Does the Prime Minister respect that mandate, and will he acknowledge it? [3893]

The Prime Minister: Of course I acknowledge the Unionist party's mandate. After Prime Minister's questions, I shall make a statement on how we try to achieve a lasting political settlement in Northern Ireland. It is very difficult, and difficult decisions have to be taken there; but I hope that the hon. Gentleman understands that, just as I respect the good faith with which he carries out his work, we are trying in good faith to ensure that we get the lasting political settlement that we want. I hope that we can do that on a basis that is satisfactory to his position as well as to everyone else's.

Q10. **Mr. Hanson:** Is my right hon. Friend aware of the strong links between social disorder and vandalism, and high levels of subsequent crime in many of our neighbourhoods and estates? Does he agree that the need to tackle crime is extremely important, but that to do so we must pledge ourselves to zero tolerance of vandalism and social disorder on many of our estates? Will he give that pledge today to the House? [3894]

The Prime Minister: I can certainly give that pledge on both those elements.

First, it is essential that we provide hope and opportunity for young people who are unemployed, which is why the windfall tax and the welfare-to-work programme are so important. If we cannot achieve that aim in that way, those young people will simply be left where they are, without the hope and opportunity that they need.

Secondly, with that opportunity comes responsibility. The Crime and Disorder Bill which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is to introduce will contain measures that crack down on juvenile offending and anti-social behaviour. It is precisely the right balance of rights and duties which the overwhelming majority of people in this country want.

Q11. **Mr. Rendel:** Following his answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), can the Prime Minister confirm that, if savings are made this year by one Department, they will be allocated to another Department, even if that means that the receiving Department's ceiling is thereby exceeded? [3895]

The Prime Minister: No. As I made clear to the right hon. Member for Yeovil, the overall control total and the departmental limits will stay. As the right hon. Gentleman noted, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer made it clear in Denver that if, for example, we can get social security bills down, there can be greater investment in education. We do not take a ridiculous view on the matter, but it is important to keep the limits in place because of the enormous problems that we will inherit.

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the estimated annual cost of prescription fraud recently uncovered by the Department of Health amounts to more than £100 million, equivalent to 14,500 heart bypass operations or 22,000 hip replacements? Will he ensure that there is speedy action to crack down on such fraud, in particular by introducing a criminal offence of evading payment?

The Prime Minister: I totally agree with what my hon. Friend says about prescription fraud. It is costing the national health service tens of millions of pounds every year. That is why we have taken action. The precise nature of the action and the sanctions that will be applied are being considered by my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary. If people defraud the system, they are committing a criminal offence, and the law should be properly applied. Although it is important that we make sure of the right provision in the health service, it is equally important that we bear down heavily on any attempt to defraud the system.

Q12. **Mr. Lansley:** Will the Prime Minister make a decision and say now that no pensioner who currently receives free prescriptions will be asked to pay for them by his Government? [3896]

The Prime Minister: I went through that matter last week with the Leader of the Opposition's predecessor. The review will be carried out. We are not getting into the business of ruling in or ruling out every single thing. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman wait for the outcome of the review, before attacking us. I suggest that he also bear in mind the fact that the party of charges in the health service is his party—*[Interruption.]* If the Opposition want a debate about it, I point out that that party removed free eye tests, put up dental charges and increased prescription charges 953 per cent. in real terms. We do not need lessons from the Conservative party.

Ms Oona King: Is my right hon. Friend aware that my constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow suffers the worst

problem of overcrowded housing in the country, with cases of 14 people living in two bedrooms? That represents a level of deprivation that many hon. Members on these green Benches would not imagine existed in Britain in 1997. Will my right hon. Friend outline the measures that the Government will take to alleviate that appalling and fundamental problem?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the problems that many people face in the inner cities. That is precisely why we have introduced programmes to tackle long-term unemployment and inner-city regeneration programmes—including the release of capital receipts and other measures that will help people to find work. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members may not think that this is a problem, but I assure them that it is. It should be the fundamental objective of any Government to try to alleviate poverty among the most disadvantaged in our society. We are doing that through our programmes on education, unemployment and housing and through a range of other measures that will help those people.

Q13. **Dr. Tonge:** In view of recent press reports, which quote Government sources, about the inevitability of a fifth terminal at Heathrow airport and in view of the on-going public inquiry, which is costing many millions of pounds, will the Prime Minister tell us the Government's position regarding a fifth terminal? [3897]

The Prime Minister: The position is that we have always said that we will await the outcome of the inquiry—*[Interruption.]* That is not just our position; it was also the position adopted by the previous Government. It is really the only sensible thing to do. If an inquiry is established to determine whether planning consent should be given, it is only sensible that one should await the outcome of that inquiry before making a decision. That is not extraordinary; it is plain common sense.

Northern Ireland

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): Madam Speaker, with permission, I shall make a statement about the Government's continuing search for peace and a political settlement in Northern Ireland.

In my speech in Belfast on 16 May, I set out the principles of the Government's approach: first, the primacy of the consent principle, to make it clear that any settlement must command the consent of both unionists and nationalists and cannot be imposed on Northern Ireland against the wishes of a majority of its people; secondly, the need for urgent progress in the talks and particularly the need for the key political issues to be addressed as soon as possible; thirdly, the absolute unacceptability of violence or the threat of violence in the democratic process; fourthly, the desirability of talks involving all the parties, including Sinn Fein, if, and only if, there is an unequivocal IRA ceasefire; and, fifthly, the need to move on rapidly without Sinn Fein if there is not.

I want, therefore, to move as rapidly as possible to an agreed political settlement. The situation in Northern Ireland means that delay is not acceptable. I also continue to believe that such a settlement must be one with which all the people of Northern Ireland can feel comfortable and to which they can give their allegiance. The outline of a settlement is clear. The key elements are devolution in Northern Ireland, including an Assembly elected and operating on a widely acceptable basis; and sensible cross-border arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

I believe that there is a wide measure of agreement on those two elements, although there may be disagreement about the details. New arrangements will also be needed between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, including formal constitutional acceptance on both sides of the principle of consent and a new, more broadly based Anglo-Irish Agreement. They represent the three strands of the negotiations.

Terrorism continues to haunt Northern Ireland. We were reminded of that again this morning, when only prompt RUC action averted another serious attack. Ten days ago, we saw the despicable murders by the IRA of RUC Constables John Graham and David Johnston. Five more young children are without fathers. The whole House will join me in condemning that pointless and cowardly crime. Those responsible deserve our contempt in a measure equal to the sympathy that we feel for the constables' families and colleagues. We shall do everything in our power to bring those responsible to justice.

However, this was worse than just another terrorist crime. The location and the timing of the murders, which occurred close to one of the most sensitive areas for marches, can be seen only as deliberately provocative. However, it was even worse than that—and I shall explain why. I announced in my Belfast speech that officials could meet Sinn Fein to ensure that there was no misunderstanding of our position and to hear Sinn Fein's response to my statement that the settlement train was leaving, with or without it. That initiative was widely welcomed, and two meetings were held.

Following the second meeting, in order to make our position absolutely clear and to remove any shred of justification for claiming that it was not, I authorised the sending of an aide-memoire to Sinn Fein putting in writing the Government's position on the points where Sinn Fein had sought clarification. The aide-memoire was passed to Sinn Fein on Friday evening, 13 June, three days before the Lurgan murders. I have placed a copy in the Library.

The aide-memoire set out clearly and concisely the Government's position on confidence-building measures, decommissioning and how long we thought that the talks should last. It also repeated that Sinn Fein's entry into talks required an unequivocal ceasefire, and that a period of time would be needed to ensure that that was genuine and that words and deeds matched. In order to put at rest fears that the Government might seek to spin out that process, it added that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would come to a political judgment about Sinn Fein's qualification for entry in some six weeks.

Assuming that words and deeds were consistent with a genuine and unequivocal ceasefire, Sinn Fein would at that point be invited to join a plenary session of the talks. It would then need to make clear, as the other participants have done, its absolute commitment to the Mitchell principles. The aide-memoire represented a reasonable approach, which had the full support of the American and Irish Governments, although the text was entirely our own.

Then came the appalling murders in Lurgan. They caused revulsion and outrage not only in this country but across the world. That was clear to me in the United States, where President Clinton condemned the cold-blooded killings in exactly the same terms as I did. It was clear, too, in my discussions with the outgoing Taoiseach, Mr. Bruton.

The credibility gap that the IRA and Sinn Fein have to bridge is wider than ever after Lurgan. Whatever Sinn Fein now says or does, I am determined to move on. It is essential to make political progress rapidly. The preparation for substantive talks must quicken.

Last autumn, we—that is, the previous Government—and the Irish Government, building on discussions in the talks, began to develop a comprehensive set of proposals for the handling of decommissioning. Final agreement was reached on them earlier this week. The two Governments have today given those proposals to the independent chairman of the talks, Senator George Mitchell, for circulation to the parties involved in the talks, and will be commending those proposals to the other participants as a basis for agreement on this important and complex subject. Again, a copy has been put in the Library.

Briefly, we propose the establishment of an independent commission to make proposals for decommissioning and to monitor its implementation, and a committee of the plenary to deal with these issues, with a sub-committee specifically on decommissioning.

The two Governments are fully committed to the approach to decommissioning that is set out in the report of the international body. That recommended

"an approach under which some decommissioning would take place during the negotiations."

The report foresaw mutual progress on decommissioning and substantive political issues leading to a progressive pattern of mounting trust and confidence. That is what the two Governments want to see.

Under our proposals, a plenary meeting should be convened every two months to enable all participants to review progress across the entire spectrum of the negotiations, including decommissioning, and to consider whether the necessary confidence is being maintained. All participants, including Sinn Fein, if it is there, will, of course, have already committed themselves to the Mitchell principles. They include not only the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations and the renunciation of force, or the threat of force, but action to prevent so-called punishment killings and beatings.

A second sub-committee will deal with other confidence-building measures that are set out in the Mitchell report. There can be no question of trading guns for political concessions in all this. There will need to be genuine progress in both decommissioning and the political negotiations if the process is to be successful. All the parties in the talks will have to face their responsibilities.

If the proposals provide a basis for agreement, important preparatory work can take place over the summer. It will be crucial to put the machinery in place as soon as possible, in particular the independent commission. I appeal to all the parties to look at the proposals in a constructive spirit. I really do not believe that there is another way forward.

Agreement would at last clear the way for substantive talks to start in earnest. I want them to begin as quickly as possible. I am also determined that, so far as we can influence the process, the talks will move as fast as possible. I can announce for the first time a clear timetable. The substantive talks should start in early September at the latest. In my view, they should conclude by next May at the latest, when the legislative basis for the talks expires. That is an ambitious target, but I have no doubt that it is achievable if all concerned put their minds to it.

As I said at the beginning of my statement, there is broad agreement on the key elements of a settlement: devolved and fair government in Northern Ireland, sensible and significant north-south arrangements, and a revamped relationship between the two Governments. The outlines of a settlement are reasonably clear, even if many of the details will be fiercely fought over. Let us now get down to the substance without further ado or prevarication.

Let me also repeat, in case anyone still has a doubt, that any agreement will be put to a referendum of all the people of Northern Ireland, as well as to Parliament. So the triple lock is secure.

There is no time to waste. The situation on the ground in Northern Ireland is fragile. Everyone is conscious of the dangers of the forthcoming marching season, and no one wants to see a repetition of last year's dreadful events. On that, too, the Government are determined to act. As the North report said, the best way to balance the conflict of rights and responsibilities involved in disputed marches is through local accommodation.

The Government are absolutely committed to doing everything they can to encourage a local accommodation at Drumcree, as elsewhere, to take account of the legitimate concerns of all sides. Accordingly, the Secretary of State is today issuing invitations to discussions with the Orange order and the Garvaghy road residents at Hillsborough castle on Friday. Nobody will be forced to talk face to face to those with whom they do not wish to talk, but my right hon. Friend will make a further determined effort to make progress. I appeal to all concerned to accept that invitation to talks. Accommodation need not be a dirty word where human lives may be at stake.

This morning I met the 12-year-old girl, Margaret Gibney, who wrote to me and to other public figures, urging us to commit ourselves to bringing about peace in Northern Ireland. I owe it to her, and this House and all who have influence and authority owe it to her, to put a stop to the killing and to put in place a lasting political settlement. She has enjoyed one year of peace in the whole of her life. When her children are born, I want every year of their lives to be a year of peace.

This process must get moving. The settlement train is leaving, with or without Sinn Fein. If it wants to join, it is absolutely clear what it has to do. I have dealt straight with members of Sinn Fein, and I expect straight dealing from them. We and the other parties will not wait around for them.

There are, of course, risks in the approach that we are taking. No lasting settlement can be arrived at without taking some risks. But I have no doubt that the measures that we have put in place are right. They provide the basis for a way forward and a settlement within a matter of months. That is what the people of Northern Ireland want, need and deserve.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): I wish the Prime Minister well in his endeavours to pursue the peace initiative so vigorously commenced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). The Opposition share his horror and condemnation of recent murders, including the two RUC officers in Lurgan. We also share his concern about the fragile situation on the ground in the Province.

I welcome in particular the continued improved appreciation in the United States of the real character of Sinn Fein-IRA. I also welcome the Prime Minister's efforts to find a credible and secure way through the decommissioning block. I welcome his assurance that, in informing Sinn Fein that in the event of an unequivocal IRA ceasefire it could gain entry to the talks in six weeks, he has made it clear that that would be dependent on the credibility of such a ceasefire as shown by both deeds and words.

There are four areas on which I seek further information or reassurance. First, will the Prime Minister confirm that he will proceed with simultaneous negotiations on all three strands as originally set out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke)? Secondly, can he confirm that there will be no question of substantive negotiations with Sinn Fein proceeding without early parallel decommissioning of illegal terrorist weapons? Thirdly, does he believe that there should be regular reviews within the talks process to ascertain progress, and the viability of continuing the process? Fourthly, can he confirm that progress can be made only by agreement within the talks, reached on the basis of sufficient consensus, and that he has no intention of seeking to impose solutions?

[Mr. William Hague]

Finally, may I assure the Prime Minister that Conservative Members are anxious to maintain the previously successful bipartisan approach to these matters, provided that the Government's actions continue to be in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for welcoming the statement, and particularly for expressing his desire to maintain the bipartisan relationship. It is difficult to do such things in politics, and he deserves great credit. I think that his predecessor would agree that the attempt to establish a bipartisan relationship under the previous Government helped the process. I am grateful to him for that.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether it was clear that any participation by Sinn Fein must be on the basis of a ceasefire that is credible in word and deed. Yes, that is absolutely correct. I can agree with the four points that he put to me. The timetable for the substantive negotiations on decommissioning will be discussed by the committee that will be established, but, as I emphasised when I quoted the words of Senator Mitchell, it is a process that occurs during the negotiations. As for the simultaneous negotiations on each of the various strands, I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that they are proceeding apace at the same time.

I hope that we can make progress within the talks. I believe that it is possible to do so. I know that it requires an immense act of endeavour from all concerned, but I concur with the right hon. Gentleman that that is the only basis—it is certainly the only basis that we can see—on which we have a chance of moving the process forward. If it does not move forward, it will only move backwards; it will not stay as it is now.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): Would it be helpful if I confirmed what I suspect the Prime Minister knows already—that Liberal Democrats will wish to preserve the cross-party consensus, as we did with the previous Government?

I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. We believe that he is right to seek at this point to give more momentum to the resuscitation of the peace process on the basis of the Mitchell principles, which he has clearly done. We also believe that he will gain wide support for the idea that it is now time to make progress again, and that the negotiating train, as he put it, cannot wait indefinitely for Sinn Fein. It is "make up your mind" time for politicians and terrorists alike in Northern Ireland.

Will the Prime Minister confirm, however, that there is an open door for Sinn Fein on that train, provided that it subscribes to the Mitchell principles and has a durable ceasefire in place by that time? Will he also confirm that the best way in which Unionists in the House can represent the best interests of their constituents is to give a positive welcome to the Mitchell process and the Prime Minister's initiative, so that the two-year logjam in the peace process can end, and end soon?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, particularly about the negotiating train leaving. Sinn Fein knows what it must do: it is absolutely clear. Any ceasefire that is called must be unequivocal, and its credibility must be there in word and deed. Sinn Fein knows that—it has known it all the way through—and there is no shred of justification for the retaining of its present position.

Everyone involved in the process now has a huge responsibility to take the opportunity to move it forward. As I said a moment ago, if it does not move forward, it will move backwards. One of the reasons why I thought it so important to try to act early is that the situation is fragile. In some areas, it is deteriorating on the ground. If we do not move the process forward now, I fear for the future.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): The Prime Minister will recall agreeing with my hon. Friend the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) last week when, after the murder of two policemen in Lurgan in my constituency, he described Sinn Fein-IRA as irredeemable. Does he not agree that the attempt last night in Lurgan to murder members of the security forces and the thwarted ambush at Woodbourne RUC station in west Belfast this morning reinforce that description? Does he appreciate that most people will wonder why yet another last chance is being given to terrorists who have failed again and again to renounce violence?

Will the Prime Minister make it clear that an unequivocal ceasefire must be a genuinely permanent end to violence with no more social and economic terrorism and no more orchestrated civil disorder, and that the character of the ending of violence is much more important than any time period, however it might be expressed? Does he agree that the 17-month delay in implementing the Mitchell report proposal for a verification commission to oversee decommissioning of terrorist weapons is a serious reflection on both the British and Irish Governments, and that it reinforces the suspicion of many of us that there are elements within those Governments that do not want to see any actual decommissioning at all?

Does the Prime Minister agree that parallel decommissioning as suggested by Mitchell must mean decommissioning that begins with the talks, continues during the talks and is complete at the end of the talks? Does he not agree that, consequently, any timetable for talks must be matched by a timetable for decommissioning and that the paper that he is circulating is seriously deficient in such mechanisms and needs to be supplemented? Can we be assured that those deficiencies will be remedied before the summer recess, so that the target date in September is not postponed? It is not enough simply to put mechanisms in place: they must actually start to work.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that statement and pay tribute to his determination to try to move this process forward in what I know is a very difficult situation for him. I entirely agree that the essence of any ceasefire is that it is a genuine end to violence. It is the sincerity of it that is the most important thing—I totally accept that.

It is worth, when hon. Members can, re-reading the Mitchell six principles and understanding that they represent a pretty tough and clear statement not just that there should be an unequivocal end to violence, but that, during the course of the negotiations and talks, there

should be no threat of violence; that no one should be able to negotiate with the idea that, if the negotiations do not go the way that he wants, going back to violence is an option. That would be a false negotiation and it must not happen.

It is not just the bombings and the killings that we read about, but the punishment beatings, the thousand little examples of acts of mini-terrorism and violence that make life absolute hell for people in many communities. When one talks to a 12-year-old schoolgirl and finds that she is so aware of the problems and has lived with them all her life, one realises that there is a heavy responsibility on everyone to make sure that this situation ceases.

In respect of decommissioning, as I made clear, it must be during the negotiations. That is part of the whole process upon which Senator Mitchell based his report, and he made that quite clear, because it was the very issue that was debated and discussed before he came to that conclusion. Obviously, the committee will discuss the precise way in which that is done. It is now extremely important for everyone to realise that this is the moment of decision, when we can move the process forward and get the chance of a genuine lasting settlement, which is entirely consistent with the principle that the consent of the people in Northern Ireland is absolute and uppermost. We have the chance to push the process forward, and we cannot let it go.

I know that the hon. Gentleman will want to make it clear that there are aspects of this with which he is unhappy and on which he seeks change, but I thank him for at least being prepared to see that there is the possibility of trying to move the process forward.

Mr. John Hume (Foyle): I place on record my deep appreciation of the priority that the Prime Minister has given to the problems of Northern Ireland since taking office. By so doing, he has strengthened enormously among people at grass-roots level the will and the wish for peace and, therefore, the pressure to bring about peace.

May I especially welcome the rational and reasonable steps that the Prime Minister has outlined in the aide-memoire to bring Sinn Fein into talks? The central step has to be a total and complete end to all violence, and I am asking that that happens because not only should there never be violence in our situation, but it is the will of the people of Ireland, north and south, that it stops immediately. Let it now stop immediately and let all parties, for the first time in our history, get together in the real task of reaching agreement that will provide lasting stability. If that is to happen in a totally peaceful atmosphere, all the better, but, if it is not, let the rest of us get together and work quickly and strongly with both Governments to reach that agreement, to put it to the people and to provide lasting peace and stability.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that very much indeed. May I assure him of this? The attention that we have given to this is because we believe that the process is so important and the situation so serious. I agree with what he says about the total end to violence and I agree particularly when he says that, of course, we want these talks to be inclusive. That is the best way for it to happen, but it is now clear what needs to happen for a ceasefire—it is absolutely plain—and if that is not going to happen, the process cannot be held up any longer. In that circumstance, we have all those people—the parties that are prepared to accept that, if we are to negotiate a lasting settlement, it should be done without the use of violence—getting together and moving the process forward. Those are the only two options that are now available to us.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): May I, as the last remaining member of the Cabinet that sent in the troops in 1969, after which more than 3,000 people died in Northern Ireland, warmly welcome the attention that the Prime Minister has given to this matter, the work done by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the active intervention of the President of the United States? My right hon. Friend will of course recall that, when the last ceasefire occurred, brought about by my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), Albert Reynolds and the hon. Member for Belfast, West (Mr. Adams), there were no talks, and that talks and a ceasefire go together. My right hon. Friend is right in saying that a return to violence offers nothing for the future of Northern Ireland, but neither would any reversion to the policies followed by a succession of British Governments, who were also unable to resolve the problem.

The Prime Minister: I agree with my right hon. Friend that it is important that the violence is brought to an end. Of course, if it is important to do that, it is also important that, with or without Sinn Fein, we move the process forward so that we can get a lasting political settlement, and that will include devolution to Northern Ireland that allows this to be done on a basis that is acceptable to all traditions. That is the chance that is now there to be taken. I hope that we can take it. I agree with my right hon. Friend entirely that the history of this has been one of tragedy all the way through, and we have the responsibility now to try to end it.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): The Prime Minister referred to what he said when he was in Northern Ireland. May I remind him that he said:

> "I am prepared to allow officials to meet Sinn Fein, provided events on the ground, here and elsewhere, do not make that impossible.
>
> This is not about negotiating the terms of a ceasefire. We simply want to explain our position and to assess whether the republican movement genuinely is ready to give up violence and commit itself to politics alone."

Can the Prime Minister explain to the people of Northern Ireland, who believed him, as I did, the proposition that these officials would not be talking about a ceasefire or how it could be brought about? Can he explain how two of the matters that Sinn Fein said it was determined to negotiate and talk about—first, the time that would elapse between a ceasefire being declared and its entry into the talks and, secondly, that no obstacle would be placed in the way of its entry into the talks after that had been decided, if it declared its ceasefire—have now been yielded to Sinn Fein?

Number one is six weeks. How, in six weeks, can the Prime Minister guarantee that the declaration of a ceasefire by IRA-Sinn Fein—which, not very long ago, shot a mother in the back because she was dressed in a police uniform in the city that the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour party represents in the House, and murdered the two constables in Lurgan, and moreover,

[Rev. Ian Paisley]

was engaged in setting up other attacks on police in the last few hours—is something on which we can depend, bearing it in mind that the Canary Wharf bombing was planned when President Clinton was in Northern Ireland and when the IRA was pledging itself to peace? It was planned and was found out—

Madam Speaker: Order. I understand that this is a very serious subject, but the hon. Gentleman appears to be making a speech and I have a House full of Members seeking to ask important questions. I hope that hon. Members will ask the Prime Minister questions so that we can have brisk and informative exchanges.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I want to put one final question, and it is a very simple one. If Sinn Fein is to get into the talks under these proposals, it will do so without giving up one weapon or one ounce of Semtex.

The Prime Minister: First, in relation to the talks that officials had with Sinn Fein, the time is secondary to whether there is a genuine ceasefire, and often that has to be a judgment that is made. The position that we outlined is not the position that Sinn Fein wanted. Likewise, in relation to decommissioning, the talks about whether there could be an agreement on decommissioning, at least between the British and Irish Governments, have been going on since last autumn. It is a process that is very much based on the outline of an agreement then.

I agree that the killings are appalling. Of course they are. One had only to see on television the pictures of the funerals of the two RUC people killed. It is unbelievable; it is an offence against the very meaning of humanity that those crimes occurred. But what we are trying to do is to prevent such things happening, and we are trying to do so in a way consistent with basic principles. The basic principles are, first, that no change should be made to the way in which Northern Ireland is governed without the consent of the people of Northern Ireland; and secondly, that, if we can reach agreement in the talks that happen, it is put to a referendum of the people in Northern Ireland. So there will be ample opportunity for people to say whether the settlement is fair or unfair.

However, one always comes back to the situation that there are only two ways of resolving this—violence or political and democratic debate. We want to resolve it by non-violent democratic debate. In order to achieve that, we have done everything we can. Whether Sinn Fein is part of the process now is up to it. As President Clinton said, the ball is in its court. I want the process to move forward, because I fear what will happen if it does not.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): If the Government in this context use categorical words such as "last", "final" and "ultimate", can the Prime Minister give an assurance that those words will mean exactly what they say, as nothing is more dangerous in these matters than the impression being abroad that further, better and alternative particulars might be on offer?

The Prime Minister: I agree—that is exactly right—which is why I have said very simply that it is a matter now for Sinn Fein to determine what its future will be in this situation. We have set out the basis upon which anybody can participate in the talks, which is that there must be a ceasefire that is unequivocal, clear in word and deed. In other words, it must be clear that any persons sitting down to talk are sitting down to talk without the threat of going back to the gun if they do not get their own way. That is clear. The basic principles of that, which have been set out over a long period, are also clear.

The huge change that has happened—the change that happened under the former Prime Minister—is that we have a situation now where all the main parties in the Republic of Ireland agree that this is the right way forward. The main party of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland agrees that this is the way forward. In those circumstances, there cannot be any shred of justification for people saying that there is any other way. We will not yield on that at all.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): May I thank the Prime Minister for his continued personal support for peace in a part of the United Kingdom, which is a very beautiful Province indeed? Does he remember that, during the last ceasefire, the number of punishment beatings by paramilitaries increased? Does he agree that the quality of any ceasefire has to be measured not only by the length of time, but on whether paramilitary punishment beatings finish?

The Prime Minister: I agree, and that is where the Mitchell principles are an important part of the process. Any party that has come into the talks will have come in on the basis of agreeing with the Mitchell principles, and one is specifically related to punishment beatings. Those beatings in any part of the community are an outrage. It is so important to make sure that the ceasefire is genuine, and we need to eradicate the culture of resolving issues by violence rather than through the rule of law and due process. In the end, that is the only guarantee of the rights of the citizen.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): Does the Prime Minister appreciate that, if Sinn Fein is admitted to the talks, it will say that it has no weapons to decommission and that it is a political party with a mandate? Does he further appreciate that, with the time scale reduced to September until May, to some eight months, and without a firm determination that the first weapons will be handed over the day that it is admitted, Sinn Fein will string out any discussions about decommissioning over that period and go through the whole gamut of political discussions on the political track without handing over a single gun? Once it has come out the other end with its armoury intact and its active service units ready for action, we shall be back to square one. It will examine the democratic process, and if that does not deliver what it wants, it will resort to the methods that have traditionally been the only way in which it can fulfil its objectives.

The Prime Minister: It is important that we have the time scale for the talks in order to get an agreement, because that is the only way to concentrate people's minds on it. As for Sinn Fein stringing out the process, the review built into the decommissioning arrangements that we have put forward is designed precisely to prevent that. In respect of Sinn Fein going back to violence if it does

not get what it wants, in the end what is important is to do the best we can to make sure that the process is carried through.

We have made it absolutely clear that the ceasefire must be genuine and unequivocal. If there is any attempt or threat to revert to the use of violence in the course of the talks, the hon. and learned Gentleman will know that, in the report of Senator Mitchell and of the international body, it is made clear that, in those circumstances, any party that reverts to violence cannot remain in the talks. That will be the case.

The alternative is to let the present situation drift and continue, and I cannot do that. I have looked at it with the best judgment I can. In such a situation, one always worries that one's judgments are wrong, because they are so difficult to make and the calls are so fine. It is difficult, but I have given it the best shot that I can. If we do not try to do something that is consistent with principle but which gives us the chance at least of moving the process forward, all we do is engage in the ritual of violence and more violence, condemnation and more condemnation—and the whole of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom is fed up with that.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): May I commend the Prime Minister's clarity and consistency on the issue, and welcome the work done by the Secretary of State and her team? One of the most important parts of his statement concerned the close working relationship between the British and Irish Governments. Is it not a fact that, when the British and Irish Governments work closely together, the men of violence, whether unionist or republican, are marginalised, but when the British and Irish Governments are driven apart, those people gain in strength? It is therefore vital that my right hon. Friend does as he says he intends—and I am sure that he will—by building on that relationship and developing it.

The Prime Minister: Of course it is important that we work with the Irish Government, although that must always be on the basis of the principles that we have set out.

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): While I welcome and support the Prime Minister's central points, I seek reassurance on one. Is he really sure that the decommissioning that he proposes is in parallel? Do not his proposals allow substantive talks to start before there is any agreement on any decommissioning proposals, let alone agreement by an independent commission and the two Governments? Is there not a danger that the proposals give significant ground to the IRA's demands for the postponement of decommissioning for as long as possible?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his general welcome. The purpose of what Senator Mitchell put forward was that decommissioning should happen during the negotiations, which is not what Sinn Fein sought. The details of how the new committee will work, together with other aspects, will be arranged over the summer. I should like to get on with that as quickly as possible. If that can happen, we shall be able to make a start all the sooner on the process.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is it not clear from the Prime Minister's statement that the IRA has run out of excuses for not stopping its terrorist campaign? In view of the often unjustified criticism that this country receives abroad about what is happening in Northern Ireland, not least from the United States, would it not be useful to try to get those countries and Governments to understand what my right hon. Friend said today and the efforts that are being made and have been made previously to get peace in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I welcome the honesty and forthrightness with which he has expressed his views on these issues over a number of years. It is essential that we build support in every part of the world for our position. When I was in the United States, I noticed a different attitude, even among elements of the media and opinion in Congress and the Senate that had previously been prepared to be sometimes sympathetic and often extremely naive towards the activities of Sinn Fein and the IRA. That has changed, because people can see that the British Government are trying to do what we can. There is a growing centre ground that stretches across the communities in Northern Ireland, consisting of people who say that, if Sinn Fein is prepared to play by the rules, it can have its place in the talks, but if it is not, we have to move on without it.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): The Prime Minister has made a persuasive, powerful and compelling statement to the House this afternoon. I pray most sincerely that his proposals will succeed, but I think that he would expect me to ask this: what happens if Sinn Fein-IRA, the callous killers and terrorists, is not prepared to join the peace process or to agree to what I hope will be a peace settlement? What fallback position does he have to contain and—I put this directly to him—to take out those who are seeking to govern by the bomb, the bullet and punishment?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his broad welcome for the proposals. If Sinn Fein and the IRA do not agree to be part of the process, the rule of law will continue to be applied to them. We shall look at every means we can to ensure that that is the case. If those who are exercising violence are not prepared to give it up, it is important that they are brought to justice. Within the rule of law, we shall do all that we can to ensure that that is the case. That is why I said earlier that we shall do everything we can to pursue those responsible for the Lurgan killings. We shall be doing the same for those responsible for punishment beatings. If Sinn Fein cannot be part of the process because it decides that it will not, people will see it exposed and they will understand that we owe it to the citizens of Northern Ireland to give them the same rule of law there that we have elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): I wish my right hon. Friend every success with this initiative. Does he agree that it is essential for the British and Irish Governments to work closely together to further the peace process? Will he tell the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) and other critics of the initiative that the idea that decommissioning should be in parallel with talks rather than a precondition for talks is not exactly original? It was first proposed by Senator Mitchell's

[Mr. Dennis Canavan]

commission almost 18 months ago. If it had been accepted by the then Tory Government, the peace settlement train might have been closer to its destination.

The Prime Minister: I hope that all the parties understand the importance of agreeing to the principles that were set out by Senator Mitchell—not merely the Mitchell principles as such, but what he said in relation to decommissioning, that is, that it should happen during negotiations. That is important for everyone to accept. I hope that people will, because that is the right basis on which decommissioning can proceed.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): Does the Prime Minister accept that the IRA still relies on violence as the core and overriding element of its strategy, as manifested when it brought the ceasefire to a conclusion at Canary Wharf, when it responded to the aide-memoire of the Prime Minister last week and this morning when it tried as a prelude to this statement to kill policemen going into Woodbourne police station? Can he assure me that decommissioning is not in his terms a euphemism intended to dilute the word "disarmament" and that he and the Irish Government sincerely mean what they say in the first sentence of the statement that he will release to the parties this evening—

"The two Governments are resolutely committed to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations"?

Will he assure me that he understands "parallel" to mean exactly what my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), my party leader, requested it to mean this afternoon? Will the Prime Minister implore the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour party, if he is sincere about what he said in the House this afternoon, to interface with other democrats in Northern Ireland, come back into the forum and try to make progress, as he gives the House the impression that he wants to do?

The Prime Minister: As I made clear, decommissioning has to be something that happens during the negotiations. As for what has been said by ourselves and the Irish Government, yes, both of us hold to the position set out in that agreement. It is important that we manage to make progress on it. My hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), the leader of the SDLP, has also shown by what he has said today considerable courage in wanting to move the process forward and saying that, if Sinn Fein is not prepared to abide by the same rules as everyone else, he is prepared to work with others to ensure that the process is carried forward. That is the only hope.

The hon. Gentleman says that violence is still relied on by the IRA. That is right. There is no doubt about that. That is precisely why we have to reach a situation either in which we move on the process without the men of violence, or in which a clear and unequivocal ceasefire is called and we move the process on inclusive of everyone. One way or the other, the process now has to move forward.

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): May I commend the two Governments on finally agreeing a position on what is one of the single most important issues in Northern Irish political life? May I also commend the Prime Minister for placing the question of decommissioning where it should be—at the heart of the Mitchell recommendations? The Prime Minister knows that some of us have sat for one year dealing with the problem, so may I ask him to tell the House that that is a firm position by the two Governments and that it will not be amendable within the talks process? Will he assure us that we shall not have to spend another month, two months, three months or six months dealing with the interminable amendments and procedural devices that have bedevilled the issue?

The Prime Minister: What is important is that we use what is there as the basis for moving the process on. I am happy to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for the work that he has done to try make progress. It must be deeply frustrating for all concerned to be sitting there unable to make substantive progress. It is doubly frustrating, because there is essential agreement on the elements of any eventual agreement. Those elements are, first, devolution to a Northern Ireland body that is credible and has support across the political process and, secondly, some form of north-south co-operation. Those are precisely the details that serious-minded politicians should be able to discuss. The whole purpose of what we are doing is to ensure that we get on to the substance and away from the points of procedure.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Thank you. We will now move on to other business.

BILL PRESENTED

INTERNET (DISSEMINATION OF CHILD PORNOGRAPHY)

Mrs. Ann Winterton presented a Bill to amend the law on the use of the Internet for the dissemination of child pornography; and for related purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 28 November, and to be printed [Bill 29].

Opposition Day

[1st Allotted Day]

London Underground

Madam Speaker: I must inform the House that I have selected the amendment standing in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.21 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the belated recognition by the Government that the future operation of, and investment in, London Underground can best be carried out by privately-owned companies; and urges the Government to avoid dogma and pursue with vigour ways to maximise private investment in the Underground whilst preserving safeguards for passengers.

I will be brief, because the time for the debate has, necessarily, been severely truncated.

The aim of both the Opposition debates is to get some clarity about the Government's position on two important areas of policy. Before I discuss London Underground, I should say that the first time that I spoke from the Opposition Front Bench on transport was 21 years ago. When various commentators urged my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition to make up his shadow Cabinet by jumping a generation, I am not sure that they exactly had me in mind. As one unkind commentator has said, it is rather like Alex Ferguson recalling Nobby Stiles. One thing that does slightly improve my morale is that, as a regular traveller on the underground, I have at least so far been spared the ultimate indignity of anyone getting up to offer me his seat.

There is one clear advantage in my position—I can remember the days when I was Secretary of State for Transport. Then, my consistent opponents were the then hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), now Secretary of State for Health, and, above all, the then hon. Member for Member for Kingston-upon-Hull, East—now the right hon. Member for Hull, East (Mr. Prescott), the Deputy Prime Minister.

I do not recall that the cause of private investment was uppermost in their minds then. Indeed, I remember how the Deputy Prime Minister opposed the Transport Act 1981, which attracted private investment to the British Transport Docks Board and various subsidiaries of British Rail. So strong was the right hon. Gentleman's commitment to my plans to attract private investment in transport that he concluded his speech with the words:

"It should be made clear to all who seek to buy shares in these companies that they will not benefit from their action. As soon as the Labour Opposition are returned to power, they will take the quickest means possible to regain control of these sectors".—[*Official Report*, 13 January 1981; Vol. 996, c. 932.]

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): Hear, hear.

Sir Norman Fowler: I am delighted to see the hon. Gentleman, who is probably about the only man on the Government Benches these days who agrees with those words.

Mr. Livingstone: There are some others.

Sir Norman Fowler: I will be delighted to hear whether the Secretary of State for Transport or the Minister are as enthusiastic. We will await developments.

My view on transport policy has always been that the essential test—the acid test—should be what is in the best interests of the transport user or customer. The London underground is a very good system; it is capable of becoming an excellent system, and that must be the whole aim of policy. We all know one of the problems it faces: over the past five years, there has been £3 billion of public investment in the London Underground system, but, even so, there is a backlog of investment of around £1.2 billion.

No one but a hopeless party bigot believes that the problems of investment have come about in the past 15 years. We only have to look at the evidence given by London Transport to the Select Committee on Transport to understand that that is not true. That evidence shows the picture since 1960—not only the excellent record of the last Conservative Government, but how investment recovered from the capital spending cuts of the last Labour Government. [Hon. Members: "Oh!"] Well, that is one part of the Government's case, as stated in their amendment. They are in a peculiarly weak position to lecture anyone on capital investment, given Labour's record in power on capital investment in health, transport and almost any other area.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I am deeply grateful to the Minister, who has so much chutzpah I wonder how he manages to get the words out. Would he like to read the evidence that London Underground gave the Select Committee a little bit more carefully? He might find that the evidence made it very clear that London Underground had spelt out to the Conservative Government exactly what damage was being done, but had been faced with consistent and quite swingeing cuts.

Sir Norman Fowler: I am grateful for the elevation the hon. Lady has given me, but I am not yet the Minister. However, if she reads the report of the Select Committee on Transport, which I have here, she will see clearly set out the pattern of investment since 1960. She will see clearly how that investment rose during the last period of Conservative Government; she will also see clearly her own party's performance during its last period of power, and, indeed, the period before that. She remembers as well as I do the capital cuts that Labour made. My point is that the Labour Government are in a peculiarly bad position to lecture anyone on capital investment, in the underground or anywhere else.

No one doubts that there is a need for new investment—there is no question about that—and neither does anyone doubt that the present system of public funding will not produce the goods. That is the lesson of the past 20, 30 or 40 years.

No one can seriously complain that the Conservative party has failed to make its policy clear. My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), to whom I pay tribute for his work as Secretary of State for Transport, set out in February three options for the privatisation of the underground. Those options included the sale of London Underground as a single business, or the establishment of a structure similar to the national railways model, with a track authority owning the network and operators running trains on individual lines.

In addition, my right hon. Friend gave 10 commitments to passengers and staff, including commitments to through ticketing, safety, concessionary fares and control on fares

[Sir Norman Fowler]

generally. Above all, he gave a commitment to investment and to ploughing the proceeds of privatisation back into the underground system. That was a clear statement, and it is there for all to see.

Labour rejected that plan, and, in his response to my right hon. Friend's statement, the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), now the Minister for Employment and Disability Rights, quoted—not once, but three times—what he called a "leaked letter" from my right hon. Friend.

Throughout the election campaign, Labour maintained that hostility to my right hon. Friend's plans. Imagine, then, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the surprise of Labour supporters everywhere when they opened their newspapers on 16 June to find that what appeared to be another U-turn was being conducted. *The Guardian*, which even Ministers will concede is not exactly a high Tory newspaper, led with the headline:

"Prescott plans to sell the Tube. Options go well beyond Manifesto commitment."

That report and other reports said that among the options being considered by the Government was the option to split the underground into two companies—one responsible for stations and track and the other running the trains. That option would be remarkably similar to that chosen for the privatisation of the railways—universally condemned, as I understand it, by Labour spokesmen.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): That is not true.

Sir Norman Fowler: Well, we shall find out. I am grateful for the help of the hon. Gentleman—I call him my hon. Friend. We shall see whether Ministers confirm that.

According to the report, another option would be a public-private joint venture for the whole of the underground business, and a further option would be the taking on by companies of individual lines or groups of lines, running track, stations and trains.

The draft letter in which all those options were set out—and which has evidently been seen not only by *The Guardian*, but by a range of newspapers—described the timing of the decision process as "urgent." It added, in terms which are becoming sadly typical of the Government, that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions would

"brief selected journalists who are likely to report this story in a positive light."

[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."]

Regardless of our opinion about anything else, we do not believe that that is the way to make policy or to make announcements. Such announcements should be made on the Floor of the House of Commons, not to selected friendly journalists. That is basic; it is entirely non-negotiable. I hope that the Minister will say this afternoon that that is his policy—and, moreover, that that is his Department's policy.

This afternoon, the public need to know what is happening. What are the Government up to? What are their plans for the London underground? Above all, what specific options for the future of the London underground are the Government examining?

We have seen this whole process before, in the air traffic control saga. In October 1996, when talking about National Air Traffic Services, the then Labour transport spokesman, the right hon. Member for Oxford, East, declared that Labour was totally opposed to privatisation. He said:

"Labour will do everything we can to block this sell off. Our air is not for sale."

That was in October 1996.

By April 1997, according to the right hon. Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett), now President of the Board of Trade, the policy had become:

"We have always said that we would look at these issues on their merit."

A few days later, no less a figure than the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair), now the Prime Minister, said that it was to be the subject of—you have guessed it, Mr. Deputy Speaker—a review, which is characteristic of the Government. It is, of course, entirely a coincidence that the right hon. Member for Oxford, East, the then shadow Transport Minister, now pursues his ministerial career in the Department for Education and Employment.

We want to be told on the Floor of the House the Government's policy on London Underground. We want to know that, because the London underground is, by any measure, a vital service for millions of people in the capital and millions of people who come to this city. If we are to make practical sense of persuading people out of their cars in London, it is crucial that London Underground works well.

Mr. Livingstone: I am glad that the Opposition spokesman wants the London underground to work well. When I was leader of the GLC and led a deputation to see the Minister responsible for transport at the time—the right hon. Gentleman himself—and asked him to allow the GLC to give London Transport enough funds to tackle the backlog of work and build the Jubilee line, why did the right hon. Gentleman say that no Government funds would be forthcoming? Indeed, he barred the GLC from using its own rates income to restore the fabric of the tube.

Sir Norman Fowler: I think that the hon. Gentleman has answered his own question. I can think of no worse advocate for the London underground than he was at the time he came to see me. Given his record of spending money, it would have been a brave Government who gave him any. I respect and understand the hon. Gentleman's views, however.

I believe that the opportunity now exists to take a radical step forward, to improve the service and to move away from the inadequate system of public finance and public control. There is scarcely a commentator or observer who believes that the system is working well or that it cannot be improved. I believe, further, that Conservatives are entitled to say that, when in government, we successfully showed how the policy of privatisation could benefit transport: the ports and docks, freight, the railways, British Airways. No one wants to change those services back—unless the Government are about to undergo a complete change of heart.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): The right hon. Gentleman did not touch on the success or otherwise of bus privatisation and deregulation. Does he really feel that it was a success?

Sir Norman Fowler: Yes, it was. The coach deregulation which I carried out was also a great success,

although opposed by the Liberal party. In fact, the Liberals have an even worse record than the Labour party of opposing most of these advances in transport.

Mr. Mackinlay: To this list of want-to-knows, I should like to add one more. The fare-paying public received repeated assurances from the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and from Steve Norris to the effect that the network card and similar concessions would be safeguarded following privatisation.

However, the right hon. Gentleman will have seen that 430,000 people who use the concession on the railways and the underground will face a 50 per cent. increase in fares as a result of franchising and privatisation. The railcard will be able to be used in fewer places; the intention is to kill off the concession altogether. That will increase congestion on the roads, and hit the poorest hardest. It will also diminish the revenue of London Underground.

Sir Norman Fowler: No, the hon. Gentleman is wrong. My right hon. Friend's statement about the underground clearly listed 10 commitments. One concerned concessionary fares, another was about fares more generally. I think I am right in saying that such a commitment had never been made by any Government before. The commitment was that, in the coming years, fares would not rise faster than the retail prices index.

The privatisations that we carried out have been highly successful. They have been to the advantage of the staff and companies concerned; most of all, they have been to the advantage of the public. If Labour Members do not believe that, why do they continue to pursue the policy? Labour has done a U-turn, and no longer is there any chance that they will reverse the privatisation policies that we pursued when in office. They know, in short, that we were right.

Privatisation has certainly had the effect of liberating transport companies, whether big or small, from the necessary restraints of the Treasury. That is clear and right, and is undoubtedly one of the advantages of privatisation.

It is important to understand, however, that privatisation is not simply a financial device; it is also about achieving better and more responsive management. One of its great advantages is that it gives freedom to management, allowing them to manage without for ever being second-guessed, and allowing them the opportunity to develop the business. That is what a transport undertaking is all about, and it is what businesses are all about.

There is no joy for a transport undertaking of whatever size to have Ministers and civil servants peering over its shoulders telling it what to do. That was the badge of the 1970s and the years leading up to them. That was the position that, step by step, the Conservative Government successfully reformed.

I said that I would be brief, for the obvious reason that this debate has been truncated. London Underground is the last major transport undertaking still constrained in that old-fashioned way. The challenge for the Government is to take radical action to reform the whole structure of London Underground for the benefit of the travelling public. Sadly, the vacillations of the past few weeks give the Opposition no confidence that that will be the final outcome.

4.40 pm

The Minister of Transport (Dr. Gavin Strang): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"regrets the substantial investment backlog in the London Underground which the Government has inherited; welcomes the Government's rejection of the wholesale privatisation of the London Underground, as proposed by the previous Government; and applauds the Government's swift action on options for public-private partnerships to improve the Underground, safeguard its commitment to the public interest and guarantee value for money to taxpayers and passengers."

I am pleased that the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) has taken this chance to debate the future of the London Underground. It is brave of him. I welcome the chance to debate the issue, and to take this early opportunity to affirm that an improved service by London Underground is a high priority for the new Labour Government.

We set out our policy for London Underground clearly in our manifesto, which said:

"The Conservative plan for the wholesale privatisation of London Underground is not the answer. It would be a poor deal for passenger and taxpayer alike. Yet again, public assets would be sold off at an under-valued rate. Much-needed investment would be delayed. The core public transport responsibilities of the Underground would be threatened. Labour plans a new public-private partnership to improve the Underground, safeguard its commitment to the public interest and guarantee value for money to taxpayers and passengers."

We stand by that. Nothing that we have done or said since is inconsistent with that manifesto commitment. It will continue to be the framework within which our policy develops.

Let us have a bit of history—*[Interruption.]* I mean history—not the version of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, which did not even carry credibility with Conservative Back Benchers. The London underground has suffered from decades of under-investment. That is widely accepted, and the results are seen and experienced regularly by millions of Londoners and visitors to the capital. The underlying problem has been the level and uncertainty of funding under the previous Government, who delayed the investment needed to improve the network. Their record shows that they had no genuine commitment to the underground network. They increased or reduced funding as a matter of political expediency.

I shall not go back over 18 years of Tory rule; I shall go back just 10 years. The 1987 autumn statement left Government funding for the core network at its lowest level since the Conservatives came to power in 1979. It took the tragic King's Cross fire of November 1987 to produce a re-think of the Tory Government's attitude to London Underground. The Fennell report into the disaster was followed by a separate Monopolies and Mergers Commission report. In the face of that evidence, the Government could not deny the Monopolies and Mergers Commission's conclusion that

"deficiencies in the levels of service are the result of chronic under-investment in both new capacity and the replacement and renewal of existing assets".

In response, the Government increased funding in the 1991 autumn statement, before the general election, but cut it substantially in 1992, after the general election. There was then a small increase in core funding in the 1993 autumn statement, followed by a succession of reductions in successive spending rounds. As a result,

[Dr. Gavin Strang]

investment in the core underground has not been sufficient to remove the underground's backlog. The current investment backlog in the core network is more than £1 billion. According to London Transport's figures, which take into account the previous Government's public spending plans, the investment backlog in three or four years will reach £1.5 billion.

The House will be aware of the problems that London Underground has been experiencing with the Jubilee line extension project, which have resulted in cost overruns of over £300 million. London Underground is responsible for managing the project, but it has had to do so within a budget set by the previous Government. Given the overspends that almost always occur on such major projects, we are entitled to ask whether the contingency which the previous Government allowed in the original budget for the project was adequate.

The effect of those cost overruns is a reduction of more than £300 million in the amount available for investment on the core network. Each pound of overspend on the Jubilee line extension is a pound less for much needed renewals of track, signalling, stations, escalators and structures on the existing network. London Underground's management has advised us that a cut of that magnitude in investment in the core network will, in a few years, inevitably mean even slower journey times and even more disruptions.

During last year's spending round, the Conservatives knew both that existing levels of funding were already below the levels that London Underground said it needed, and that there were substantial Jubilee line cost overruns. What was their response? A cut in funding for the core network of £373 million for the two years, starting next April. There was no transport case for those cuts. They were utterly indefensible.

Against that background of consistent under-investment, a backlog of over £1 billion and further planned cuts of almost £400 million, the Conservatives announced that, if they won the general election, there would be a wholesale privatisation of the underground.

We have only to look at the situation that we have inherited on the national railway network to know what that would have meant. On the railways, taxpayers were robbed, as assets were sold off at knock-down prices. The network has been fragmented, and services have been threatened. That must not be the future for the London underground.

The truth is that we have inherited a wholly unsatisfactory situation with regard to London Underground. I and my colleagues are being bombarded with letters from irate tube users complaining to us about the problems that we inherited from the previous Administration.

We are determined to address the underground's investment needs, so that it can play its full part in a properly integrated public transport network for the capital. Our aim is to secure an affordable, reliable, clean and modern network. Despite the best efforts of its management and workers, the underground's quality of service is below that which passengers can reasonably expect. That also affects the prosperity of London as a city.

However, we cannot simply tax and spend to sort out London Underground's problems. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has therefore asked officials to examine a wide range of options to see which can deliver the world-class underground system that we all want. We have ruled out the Conservatives' plan for the wholesale privatisation of the network, but all other options will be considered.

I am happy to provide the House with details about the review of options that we are undertaking, but I stress that we are at a very early stage in the policy-making process. When we have a preferred option to announce, we shall do so, and I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we shall announce it to the House of Commons. However, it is only sensible that we should first study all options, apart from wholesale privatisation, in a calm, considered way.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The right hon. Gentleman said that he had ruled out privatisation because it would take too long to resolve the problems that he perceives with the network. Will he now announce the timetable for his deliberations, and assure the House that the Government will provide rapid and effective solutions?

Dr. Strang: I shall come to that point. It is not just a question of time: we reject the wholesale privatisation of London Underground because it would be a re-run of what has occurred with other privatisations. Assets would be sold off at disgraceful knock-down prices. We cannot produce solutions overnight.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): My right hon. Friend is right to point to the Conservative Government's legacy to London Underground. I have also seen correspondence from London Underground bosses concerning the Jubilee line overspend, which could affect services and investment in the existing network. My right hon. Friend is correct to establish a proper review of all future investment in London Underground. Will he consider also the specific problem caused by the Jubilee line overspend and its effect on the existing network? Will he contemplate short-term solutions to that problem?

Dr. Strang: My hon. Friend is right: we must address that problem. A crisis is looming on the underground. The Jubilee line cost over-run is so great that it is damaging the basic investment that is required in the fabric of the network.

As I have said, we cannot produce solutions overnight to problems that the Conservatives failed to solve in 18 years in government—indeed, they made the situation worse. We shall appoint financial advisers to help us assess the options. We hope that they will be able to provide valuable advice about potential options. I confirm also that the review of options will be taken forward as quickly as is reasonably practicable. The review will also draw on the views and the expertise of London Transport.

Options for the future of the underground will be advanced in parallel with the work that we are doing on the integrated transport policy White Paper, which will be published next year. We expect the financial advisers' options to be on Ministers' desks within three or four months. In the longer term, an integrated transport policy for London will be the responsibility of the Greater

London authority. We shall publish a Green Paper on that authority next month, so that Londoners can have their say. Whatever the future holds for London Underground, the review of options will take full account of our proposals for the Greater London authority and its transport responsibilities.

Whatever options the Government may take up in order to secure greater investment in the underground, I make it clear that our overriding priority will be passenger safety. I believe that London Underground's management give the safety of passengers and staff the highest priority. That is absolutely right. As a result, the underground has had an enviable safety record in recent years.

Whatever happens to London Underground in future, it is vital that safety continues to be of paramount importance and is not compromised in any way. This is a very important issue in our review of options, and we shall ensure that the Health and Safety Executive and Her Majesty's railway inspectorate are fully involved. I pay tribute to London Underground staff, who do a very good job in trying circumstances.

Sir Norman Fowler: Before the right hon. Gentleman moves on to another subject, will he set out the options under consideration? He keeps talking about them, but he will not tell us what they are. May we assume that the options published in *The Guardian* and in other newspapers are among those that he and the Government are considering? Is he considering the option that companies be responsible for the track and, conceivably, that other companies should run the trains on different services?

Dr. Strang: The Government have ruled out the option of wholesale privatisation—I make that absolutely clear. However, we believe that the private finance initiative option in relation to "Power", for example, has the potential for success. There is also the option of many more private finance initiatives. We have not ruled out the option of a private equity stake in the capital of the underground, but that would be on terms very different from those proposed under the Conservatives with their privatisation measures.

Yes, there is a range of options, and we expect our financial advisers to come up with options that perhaps we had not even contemplated. That is why we are paying them, and we are paying them a good deal less than the Conservative Government paid their advisers, because we shall be using them for only a few months.

Sir Norman Fowler *rose—*

Dr. Strang: I shall give way to the right hon. Gentleman, but for the last time in this debate. As he has said, many hon. Members wish to speak in a short debate.

Sir Norman Fowler: I intervene to help the debate.

Will the Minister confirm that all the options that were set out in the leaked draft letter from the Department of Transport are being considered and are on the table?

Dr. Strang: Frankly, I do not know anything about the leaked document that the right hon. Gentleman is talking about. I think that *The Guardian* is an excellent newspaper, but the truth is that there is a range of options, as well as other options that have never been put on paper.

We, the Labour Government, have not been in power for eight weeks, while the Conservative Governments had 18 years. I say to the Conservatives: just hold your horses. If our record at the end of this Parliament is anything like the record of our predecessors, we shall have failed. That can be said for sure.

The fact that we are having to consider public-private partnership options for the future of the underground system is no reflection on the staff, but is due to consistent under-investment in the core network—which we are determined to address—during the terms of office of Conservative Governments.

The Government's approach to the underground is in clear contrast to that of the Conservative party. We are determined to modernise the tube, for the benefit of the people and industry in London and beyond. We are acting now to secure the necessary investment.

The Conservatives, led by dogma, threatened the people of London with their wholesale privatisation plans. Public assets were to be sold off at bargain-basement prices, much-needed investment was to be delayed, and the core public responsibilities of the underground were to be threatened.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Strang: No, I shall not give way again.

On 1 May, the Conservatives' dogmatic wholesale privatisation was given a resounding thumbs down by the people of London.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield no doubt came to the House with the idea of embarrassing the Government over recent disclosures in the media about our plans for London Underground. We have nothing to be embarrassed about. We are trying to find a practical solution to a problem that we inherited from him and others. We are not taking an ideological approach. Instead, we are being open-minded in a search for the best option. We are being entirely consistent with our manifesto commitment.

The London Underground carries as many passengers each year as the entire national rail network. It is the oldest underground railway in the world, and it is still vital both to London's economy and to the millions of people who live and work in London. But we are not getting the full potential from such an enormous national asset. The Government are determined to realise that potential through sensible public-private partnerships, not an ideologically driven wholesale privatisation.

Improving London Underground, modernising the tube and raising this public service is a London priority, but for the new Labour Government it is more than that; it is a UK priority. If London is to be a world-class capital city, it needs a modern and efficient transport system. The new Labour Government are determined to achieve that. It is for that reason that I urge the House to support the amendment and to vote against the motion.

4.58 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me as the first London Member to speak in the debate.

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

As one enters St Stephen's entrance to the Palace, on the right-hand wall there is a map of my constituency, which was donated in 1932 by the underground railways, though not in their later stylistic cartography. I have never had a prior opportunity to thank them for it, and I take the opportunity now. As a passenger, I pay tribute to the management and staff of the London underground.

This debate is being held on behalf of all Londoners, and it offers a rare, medium-term opportunity for genuine unity among London Members of Parliament, despite the Minister's speech. I speak as a current denizen of the District and Circle lines and a veteran of the Central and Northern lines. Londoners deserve more from the underground than they receive.

What is needed is well known, and the 750,000 people who work daily in my constituency know what we must achieve if we are to preserve London's competitiveness, quite apart from improving our quality of life. Several years ago, the City corporation funded a pulling together of research into London's transport needs, and London First has followed up that research.

I hope that there is agreement on funding and investment needs. We know what the deficit was 10 years ago, and we know that four sevenths of that deficit have been paid in the past decade, partly through central Government funding and partly through the profitability of the system. Three sevenths of that deficit remain, however, and the unpredictability and oscillation—in this I am critical of the previous Government—of decisions on the funding of investment in the underground has made the removal of the deficit more difficult. The House will know that current desiderata, some of which have been alluded to today, have had to be deferred this year.

I hope that it will not be a matter of controversy if I say that a Greater London council mark 2 will not be a solution, given that the deficit was built up during the GLC mark 1 under both parties. Any GLC would still leave the underground subject to Treasury control. I also hope that it will not be a matter of controversy if I say that the deficit relates to capital investment, which will in turn ease the pressure on fares through improved facilities. The money should not be used for reducing fares in the first instance.

I recognise that the benefits of some of the investment will be invisible to the general public, although constituents in Pimlico will be grateful if inaudibility could be added. Anything that the Minister who replies to the debate can say about the problem of the Pimlico noise will be very welcome.

I hope that there is agreement between hon. Members on both sides of the House on many of these matters. God moves in a mysterious way, and we may be at a crux. Privatisation, as proposed by the Opposition, and private-public arrangements, as proposed by the Government, may offer a sufficient meeting of minds to solve the problem of funding in the interests of all Londoners, although I acknowledge that the Government's amendment is discouraging in that respect.

I take comfort from earlier developments. I am not sure whether the Government's espousal of Conservative policies is matched by an understanding of Conservative principles under which the past informs the future, but the circumstances of the formation of the London passenger transport board encourage me.

In the 1920s, underground railways investment had been heavily funded through the trade facilities legislation, the provisions of which included Treasury guarantees. When Labour came to power in 1929, with the grandfather of the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) as Minister of Transport, a whole cornucopia of paradoxes developed. Herbert Morrison's plans for the London passenger transport board specifically excluded representatives of organised labour from sitting on it. In that era, trade unions played a smaller part in Labour transport policy than they do today.

Just as paradoxically, London county council, which was then under Conservative control, resisted the idea of a board, on the ground that there were no places on it for local authorities. When the Labour Government fell in 1931, it was assumed that the Bill would fall with it, but it was carried forward under the National Government. In the 1920s, Herbert Morrison had said before taking office:

"In the direction of his undertakings, Lord Ashfield"—

who was the chairman—

"had incorporated a considerable degree of public spirit for a capitalist concern. From the narrow point of view of Labour politics, I could almost have wished it were otherwise, for in all the disputations about London passenger transport policy this fact had made it harder to fight the combine."

In that context, it is worth remarking that, for all the good that flowed from the London passenger transport board, some of that attributed to it had occurred while the underground was still in the private sector. I refer to Charles Holden's design for 55 Broadway, and, perhaps even more relevant, his distinguished design for Arnos Grove station. Morden station also dates from as early as 1926. Much of the credit for that distinction must go to Frank Pick, Lord Ashfield's managing director, who belonged to both the public and the private eras and whose personal shyness was matched by a private cultural hinterland that enriched London Underground through its style.

Let me quote a passage from a speech by Lord Ashfield that was quoted in the House of Lords by Lord Banbury in opposing the Bill. I hope that I shall be allowed to quote verbatim from the dead. He said:

"In recent years, the suburbs have tended to become self-contained. The standard of shops has been improved, and luxurious cinemas have been built, so that there is not the same need or incentive to go to the centre of London for shopping or entertainment. Then the motor car has grown to be an important feature, and there are now well over 200,000 private cars registered in the London traffic area. They carry not only the family, but also neighbours and friends, and therefore withdraw more people from the public means of conveyance than at first sight would seem possible. The parking places and garages in the centre of London are filled with these cars. The theatre traffic, which at one time was carried upon the railways and omnibuses, has now largely passed to the private car."

In the context of present transport policy in London, it is worth quoting further the comment made on that speech by Lord Banbury of Southam. He said:

"How can this public Board alter that? These are factors which remain."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 1 March 1933; Vol. 86, c. 936.]

The historians of London Transport said of that intervention that it

"was one of the most sensible observations made by any contributor in the whole long course of the detailed, lively and sometimes acrimonious debate that culminated, for the time being, in the establishment of the London Passenger Transport Board."

That whole collaborative narrative encourages me to think that we can achieve something similar today. Not for nothing is "underground" one of those rare words which, although not palindromes, feature three opening letters that are the same as the last three. That seems a good omen for the two sides of the House, which approach the subject from opposite directions.

I have one "footnote" question to ask the Minister. Why, in the Government's view, does signalling—which is critical to underground developments—lag behind so many other analogous technologies, to our combined disadvantage? That is a non-partisan question, but, obviously, an industrial one.

Finally, an index that sustains me in my confidence in a sensible and prompt resolution of London Underground's investment shortfall—and the problems of the underground will not be solved unless that shortfall is dealt with—is the knowledge that the attention to environmental quality that Frank Pick initiated in the 1920s and 1930s has been matched in current developments by the commissioning of Sir Norman Foster and Richard MacCormack to design stations on the Jubilee line. I hope that my confidence that London Members of Parliament in all parties will make common cause on behalf of the underground and its passengers is not misplaced.

5.8 pm

Ms Margaret Hodge (Barking): We are debating the motion tabled by the Opposition, and I think that all Labour Members—particularly London Members—welcome the opportunity that they have given us by exercising their choice. I welcome the chance to debate an issue that is crucial to Londoners; in that I join the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). The underground is vital to the well-being of our capital city, and hence critically important to the strength of Britain as a whole.

I also welcome the debate because it gives us a chance to make clear the miserable state of the legacy that the new Labour Government have inherited. We have inherited not an excellent system, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) said, but a system that has suffered from 18 years of neglect and underinvestment. I also welcome the opportunity to discuss some of the options that are open to the Government over the life of this Parliament to put in place effective programmes that will secure what we all want—an affordable, efficient, safe and modern underground system in our capital city.

Building and running a first-class underground system is essential for the building and running of a world-class capital city. It is an essential ingredient in an integrated transport system for the capital. Businesses will stay in the capital and new businesses will invest in London only if their personnel can get around it. Visitors form an increasingly important part of wealth creation and they will come to London only if they can get around it easily; the same applies to those of us who live and work in the capital.

The issue relates not just to London and Londoners but to the United Kingdom as a whole, because, when jobs, tourists and industries come here, they create jobs elsewhere in Britain. London contributes more to the Treasury than it receives from it. It is not a drain on resources: it creates wealth for the rest of the country. What is good for London is good for Britain, but London's competitiveness has been seriously undermined and is at risk because of the inadequacies of its transport system. Businesses have expressed concern about the record of the Conservative Government. We all know about overcrowded trains, delays and cancellations, which make it difficult for businesses to recruit and retain staff. That makes them think about investing outside the capital.

It has been agreed that the millennium celebrations will take place at Greenwich. I welcome that decision, because it will attract more visitors to London and elsewhere. We have to get our public transport system right if we are to cope with the influx of people to London that those celebrations will attract. The Government are rightly looking at the environmental aspects of city living. We all say that we must tackle the growing dependence on the car, but we will change people's habits only by giving them the alternative of reliable public transport.

The problems facing the Government in that regard faced many big cities, but over the past 10 to 20 years most big cities have sought radical and dynamic solutions to the problem. Many of them have invested in new technologies and projects. The Conservative Government failed to do that. In those cities, such projects are often the pride and joy of the capital and the country. An unusual example is Venezuela, the capital of which, Caracas, has an efficient and well-maintained metro of which its citizens are rightly proud. The Conservative Government could have looked at that example in deciding how to run London's underground.

I agree with Opposition Members that we were once proud of our underground. It was once the world's best, but now it is a crumbling wreck and the neglect is not difficult to see. The system has crumbling tunnels and worn-out signalling, and the trains are overcrowded. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) shakes his head, but I wonder how often he uses the underground. We who use it know the problems, but each year our hopes of a better system were dashed as the situation worsened.

It is not just commuters and tourists who have to put up with shoddy services, because business also suffers costs as a result of the congested and gridlocked city. Business has estimated that the lack of a properly integrated transport system costs it about £20 billion a year. Anyone in London, except perhaps Conservative Members, will say that we need to get London's transport system right.

It is a bit rich for the Opposition to table a motion on the state of the London underground when the Conservative Government showed such complacency on the issue for so long. A former Transport Minister, Mr. John Bowis, said as recently as January that, under the Government, underground services were improving. The voters of Battersea did not believe him, I did not believe him and neither did Londoners. It is no wonder that Battersea now has a Labour Member.

The Opposition motion takes the biscuit. What were the Conservative Government doing for the past 18 years, and how can Conservative Members think that eight weeks in office is enough to change 18 years of neglect? We shall have to sort out the legacy that we have inherited and we must look at some aspects of the mess so that we are under no illusion about the scale of the problem. As the Minister said, the Conservatives have left us with a

[Ms Margaret Hodge]

staggering investment backlog of £1.2 billion. Worse still, they have left the Government with further budget cuts in Government grant of 28 per cent., which the Conservative Government incorporated in their budget for the next three years.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster that the Conservative Government's constant chopping and changing of investment proposals had an appalling effect on London Underground's investment plans. This year, it has been forced to cut its investment programme by £700 million. That money would make a real difference to the network. Those cuts fly in the face of the 1991 Monopolies and Mergers Commission report, which called for investment of £700 million to £750 million a year over 10 years. That advice was given to the Conservative Government in 1991, which makes it impossible for the Opposition to say that they were unaware of the problem, or that their record in government was excellent.

One of the key matters to be understood about the underground is the predicament created by the Conservative Government's failure over the Jubilee line. It is a scandal whose enormity has yet to be properly revealed. That Government allowed development to run wild in docklands without ensuring a proper transport infrastructure to link the development to the rest of London. They had resources to install such infrastructure, but they sold land cheaply and gave capital grants to the private sector and tax concessions to businesses and industries that chose to relocate in docklands.

None of those investors returned anything to the community in terms of transport structure for London. They were supposed to put money into the Jubilee line extension, but I understand that the amount of private sector investment is down to under £400 million. That was supposed to be another model private-public finance initiative undertaken by the Conservative Government, who made no allowance at all for the extra, inevitable costs that arise on such huge projects.

As a result, the extra costs, which will total about £300 million from 1997 to 1999, have had to come out of London Transport's diminished budget. Money that would otherwise have been invested in the rest of the tube network has had to be used to finance the overspend on the Jubilee line extension. To put it another way and to make it clear to the House, during 1996-97, more than £1 billion was invested in the underground system, of which £660 million went on the Jubilee line extension. Only just over £300 million was left to maintain the rest of the network.

Mr. Pickles: Does the hon. Lady now feel that the Government should make up that money? Does she believe that the Government should put in £499 million to make up the shortfall?

Ms Hodge: That is not a terribly clever point. The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that this Government are having to work within the financial parameters that were laid down by the previous Government. No one can take him seriously if he suddenly pretends that he has no responsibility for decisions that were taken in his name a few months ago and if he tries to put the onus on us.

The funding crisis that we are left with has many graphic examples. Trains are too full to get on, as anyone knows who tries to get on them in the rush hour. Cancellations are commonplace and accidents and power failures are rife. Even today, we read in the *Evening Standard* about the problems of the escalators at Highgate station, which are 56 years old, are the oldest on the network and have more or less given up the ghost.

Since 1991-92, the number of serious injuries on the tube has more than doubled. In the past year, the number of stations that have been closed for more than 15 minutes—some, I might add, for nearly an hour—has also doubled. Last November, there was a power failure, with 30,000 people stranded in tunnels, some of them for more than two hours. To what was the problem traced back? To the 91-year-old Lotts Road power station. In the same month, 10,000 passengers on the Victoria line suffered serious delay.

The previous Government cannot claim ignorance of those things. Before the last Budget, I, along with some of my Labour colleagues who are in the Chamber today, led a protest to the Treasury to ask the then Chancellor of the Exchequer not to make rumoured cuts in the underground budget. Two weeks later, the cuts were announced and they were roundly condemned by everyone—every newspaper, every pressure group, every section of society and every passenger in London. It was only in the last weeks of the previous Government, when they were scrabbling about for policies to put into a well-worn manifesto, that they decided that something had to be done.

The panacea was privatisation, but there was no coherent package, no proper method of implementation and no real answers. The previous Government assumed that the years of neglect could be solved simply by privatisation, despite the evidence to the contrary—none clearer than the fiasco caused by the British Rail privatisation.

Reference was made to the leaked memo to the then Prime Minister from the former Secretary of State for Transport, who said what would happen if the tube were privatised. It is worth reminding hon. Members of what he said: that, if we privatised the tube, the investment backlog would not start to be dealt with until the next century. As we all know, the underground needs help now, not in several years' time.

Services were also threatened in the leaked memorandum. The former Secretary of State for Transport said:

> "I do not want to set existing service patterns in stone—some services may well be uneconomic."

The implication of that is not hard to imagine. In fact, a picture was offered by a Conservative think tank—the Centre for Policy Studies—which suggested that all the stations outside zone 3 could be closed, and that that could be justified on economic grounds.

The previous Government's piecemeal approach has meant that a proper plan for the underground has always been lacking. I shall give just one other example, which I know well. From the autumn, there will be new Northern line trains, financed from the private finance initiative. It took long enough for that to happen, but they will finally run. Unfortunately, the service will not be any faster; in fact, it may be slower because we have not modernised the track, and signalling work has been put back three years because of the previous Government's cuts.

I hope that I have said enough to convince anyone listening who does not already know that the blame for

the mess lies at the Government's door [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I mean at the previous Government's door—we have all got to get used to this. It is now up to us to sort out that mess, and that is why we have announced a full-scale review of the underground.

We need a proper strategy, not a piecemeal approach. We need an integrated approach to all transport infrastructure in London, which is why our proposals for a Greater London authority and an elected mayor are essential for proper planning and a proper system in future. However, we have an immediate crisis and we need to tackle that with vigour, imagination and courage. We all recognise the public expenditure constraints that we have inherited and it is nonsense to suggest that bringing finance in to pursue the public interest is the same as privatisation. It simply demonstrates yet again the Opposition's inability to think in new terms for the modern world.

We can effectively use private finance to assist with the investment that we so desperately need. For instance, stations could be modernised with private investment and their potential for retail development exploited, so that the private sector interest could be married with a good public sector outcome. We have the example of the very successful Manchester metro, which was developed by a public-private partnership. Future investment is planned, with money coming from local authorities, Government, Europe and the private sector.

I hope that the Government will consider the proposals that have been made by Tony Travers and Stephen Glaister from the London school of economics. Their proposals found considerable support in the business community in London. They suggested a small, specific levy on the business rates in London to finance specific improvement proposals for the underground.

Clearly, business ratepayers would need to be properly consulted—and it might make a change if we allowed them to vote on whether they wish to go down that road—but, if the proposals were accepted, it could ensure a regular flow of money for investment, and it would mean that transport investment would not have either to compete with investment in hospitals and schools or to count against the public sector borrowing requirement. Most important, that concept has considerable support in the business community.

Mr. Brooke: In that device, how is the hon. Lady going to overcome the potential resistance of the Treasury, which, if it sees that that money is being provided from another source, will simply reduce the amount that is going to London Underground from central Government?

Ms Hodge: I understand that, if this mechanism were used, there would be no need for it to be considered as counting against the PSBR. That is certainly my understanding of the position.

Mr. Brooke: I made no reference to the PSBR. I simply asked how the hon. Lady would prevent the Treasury from simply using the business funding as a substitute for central Government funding.

Ms Hodge: That was a trick that the previous Government tended to pursue at every opportunity. I do not think that it is one that we would wish to imitate, because we recognise the importance of increasing investment in the underground system.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): My hon. Friend may be interested to know that, immediately before the election, Westminster city council welcomed the idea of a PFI and rejected the concept of privatising London Underground. That, of course, is the council that the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) represents. Perhaps he could explain his views on the policies adopted by his own council.

Ms Hodge: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that matter to my attention; no doubt the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster will wish to reflect on it.

I have the fullest confidence that Ministers will demonstrate imagination, and pursue the issue with vigour. There is an overwhelming consensus in London in every strata of our very mixed community that something needs to be done. There is enormous good will among the citizens, businesses and representative organisations to work with Government to find a solution to a problem that we all know is not of this Government's making.

We can leave Conservative Members to carp; that is all that they are good for. We can leave them stuck in the past while we start thinking for the future, but I make a plea that we do not leave London's underground system to—if hon. Members will pardon the expression—go down the tube. Londoners would never forgive us for that.

5.30 pm

Mr. Thomas Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I welcome the opportunity to discuss the future of London Underground, a subject close to the heart of Londoners who, according to its annual report, make 2.5 million journeys each day.

I must start by questioning why the Opposition have chosen the tube as the subject of today's debate. I assume that they are not trying to draw attention to their own record while in government because, as every regular commuter knows—I count myself in that category because I have worked in London for 16 years and have used the tube nearly every day during that time—the underground requires £1.2 billion of investment to catch up with the backlog of repairs. Passengers suffer indignity after indignity. At the main interchanges there are often queues to get into the stations, through the ticket barriers, down the escalators and on the platforms, and overcrowded trains await passengers.

According to recent London Transport statistics 22 per cent. of passengers travelling on the Central line, 21 per cent. on the Northern line and 16 per cent. on the Piccadilly line are in overcrowded trains. But the prize for the hardest-pressed commuters goes to the users of the Waterloo and City line, where more than 60 per cent. of commuters travelled in overcrowded trains.

I doubt also whether Conservative Members are seeking to highlight the so-called success of their rail privatisation programme, of which, again, I have considerable experience. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been little, if any, improvement in train punctuality, cleanliness or overcrowding. In fact, quite the

[Mr. Thomas Brake]

contrary, for Connex South Central commuters during the past couple of weeks, of which I am one, or South West Trains commuters earlier in the year.

The promised bonanza in investment has not happened since rail privatisation. Railtrack has been criticised for delivering for its shareholders but not for passengers, and savings have yet to materialise. The private companies are now receiving double the subsidy that British Rail used to receive. John Swift, the Rail Regulator, is threatening draconian fines if the rail operators do not get their act together and provide a proper public inquiry line.

I am also sceptical about the Opposition's call for the Government to avoid dogma. Was it not the Conservative Government who, but for the timely leak of a letter, would have privatised the underground for £800 million when it had assets of £13 billion? If that is not dogma, I do not know what is.

As hon. Members have said, the Opposition have chosen the subject simply to embarrass the Secretary of State who, absent-mindedly, left some notes at the BBC which have since received extensive publicity. Those papers revealed that the Government are considering a private-public partnership to run the tube where

"the private sector is the majority shareholder."

During the general election campaign the Labour party's proposals for the tube were studiously vague, but if the Government are considering the private sector as a majority shareholder, is that wholesale or partial privatisation? That reports have said that the Department of Transport would brief journalists, which suggests that something needed to be spun. I hope that today's debate will clarify the Government's current plans.

In the words of the Prime Minister's Denver statement, I hope that the Government are committed to

"an integrated transport policy that makes public transport more attractive and gets traffic flowing more sensibly."

I should add that I hope that they will reduce traffic, not simply get it flowing more sensibly.

If the Government are considering splitting the infrastructure with the rail and signalling equipment on one side and the tube services on another, will that help to achieve an integrated transport policy? Such a split may have made sense with British Rail because train operators are required to use the same track—but does it make sense for London Underground, and what are the safety implications of such a split? Unless more detail is forthcoming, I will have to describe the Government's plans as half-baked, a description used by the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith) in a debate in February on tube privatisation.

It is worth reminding hon. Members of some of the questions asked by Labour Members during that debate. How much will privatisation, even partial privatisation, cost? What guarantees will there be about maintaining and improving service levels? Will any part of the network be deemed uneconomic and be closed down? How much will be spent on consultants whom we hear the Government will be employing as part of the review? Those are questions that the Government will have to answer. One way in which the Government might consider bringing investment into, say, the Northern line, would be to rename it the Millennium line. That would be a way of guaranteeing investment in it.

No one can deny that there is a crisis and that London Underground is in need of an urgent injection of cash. The incidents of passengers being trapped underground, frequent signal failures and escalators out of operation confirm that. That makes it difficult to appreciate the "charm" of the London underground as recommended by Peter Ford, chairman of London Transport.

Core investment—that needed to keep the system in a steady state—is expected to be £350 million per annum by 2000. As we have heard, the previous Government cut grants by no less than £700 million. The public want improvements. Londoners are crying out for better public transport and for imaginative proposals such as the reopening of the old Lords Metropolitan line station. There would be some difficulty, given that the Hilton hotel is on top of it, but if it were reopened it would provide direct access to Lords cricket ground, London zoo and the central mosque.

The Liberal Democrats would like the Government to consider setting up a public interest company which would be free to borrow money on the markets, and such borrowing would be outside the PSBR. There are some working examples in the States. The establishment of such a public interest company, and possibly others, such as for the Post Office, could form part of a wider-ranging review of the Government's accounting regime. This review could consider using the general Government financial deficit as an accounting regime, as happens in other European countries. This public interest company could receive hypothecated income from a number of possible sources, and I shall outline a few of them.

I hope that the Government will consider the option of a tax on non-residential parking spaces in London. I also hope that they will consider road pricing as one of their options. A simple, low-cost way of implementing road pricing would be to require those driving through central London to display a central zone London Transport ticket on their windscreen.

Another option would be an increase in business taxes, which has been mentioned. There is support for that idea in the business community. The chamber of commerce conducted a poll and found that 84 per cent. of top business men supported some kind of congestion charge. Finally, there might be a possible tax on the users of hotel beds, although I understand that that would not be terribly popular with hoteliers. Such steps would give London Underground the stable financial regime it needs for coherent, long-term planning.

Before the general election, a number of Liberal Democrats had meetings with the management of London Transport. I was appalled to find that, as the end of the financial year approaches, the annual budget cycle means that London Transport scrabbles around for things on which to spend its money. They are not necessarily the best projects, but just projects on which it can spend the money quickly.

The experience of rail privatisation shows that moving London Underground into the private sector is by no means a guarantee of investment in either the short or medium term. We shall therefore vote against the Opposition motion, but I do not feel that we can support the Government's amendment. The amendment asks us to applaud the options being considered for "public-private partnerships" but, until there is more flesh on the bones and until the Government have squared the Circle line, so to speak, we could not support the amendment.

We urge the Minister to consider as one of the options the possibility of setting up a public interest company which could rely on the sources of income that I have described, as well as on public subsidy. That is the only way that we can provide Londoners with a tube to rival Europe's best.

5.41 pm

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): As someone who has been employed in London's transport industry for the past 11 years, I am delighted to make my maiden speech in this debate and to support the Government's amendment.

My constituency is not served by the London underground. In fact, the London underground has only just discovered the borough of Greenwich, which is where my constituency is. The Jubilee line extension will reach Greenwich in time for the millennium celebrations, bringing the London underground to Greenwich for the first time.

There are only 700 industrial jobs in my constituency; the majority of jobs in the borough are in the service industries. The majority of people who are employed travel to work in central London. London transport services provide vital links between the people of my constituency and their place of work.

Throughout the history of our capital city, transport links with London have helped shape my constituency. Communities have built up around stations such as Eltham Park and Well Hall, which have now been replaced by a new station at Eltham, a New Eltham station, Kidbrooke and Mottingham. These have given rise to a number of estates, each with its own distinct design and character, from Coldharbour in the south to the slopes of Shooters hill in the north.

The Corbett estate, which to this day has a covenant prohibiting any premises being used for the sale of alcohol, is where I live. I live in the middle of an area with no public house for many miles. Fortunately, the good Lord provides, and within the ward where I am a local councillor, the church of St. Barnabas provides a small clubhouse which is a welcome oasis for many local residents. The club is named after one of Eltham's famous sons, Frankie Howerd. I am pleased to say that it has just won the CAMRA award for the club of the year. To celebrate, there was a beer festival last weekend, and I took it to be my duty to attend. The Corbett estate was also home to another famous comedian, Bob Hope, and Eltham's little theatre is named after him.

My constituency also boasts the Progress estate, which was built during the first world war in only 11 months to house workers of the royal arsenal at Woolwich. It has the appearance of a Kent village. One of the houses was home to Herbert Morrison, who eventually moved to another house near to Eltham town centre which, to this day, bears a blue plaque in his honour. Denis Healey also lived in my ward. He was the son of a worker at the royal arsenal and lived in the properties known as the Hutments until the age of 11.

The A20 and the A2 cut through the heart of my constituency and are a reminder of the ancient links between London and Kent. Shooters hill was the old Roman road to Dover. Royalty has also held court in Eltham, and the surviving buildings of the Eltham palace built in the 14th century can still be visited today. There is also a Tudor barn which was built in the 16th century and is now an excellent pub and restaurant. Set in the magnificent surroundings of Pleasance park, it is well worth a visit; I invite all hon. Members to come and enjoy the surroundings. That is all that remains of the mansion built by Will Roper, the son-in-law of Thomas More. It later became the home of Edith Nesbitt, author of "The Railway Children", and her husband, Hubert Bland, one of the founders of the Fabian society.

There is one story which shows that commuting from Eltham to London has always had its hazards. It concerns one Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer was the clerk of works during part of the construction of Eltham palace. One of his tasks was to travel to Westminster to collect the wages. On his way back along the A2 at Hatcham near New Cross, he had the misfortune to be mugged. He was immediately sent back to collect another set of wages and was once again robbed when he reached New Cross. Soon after that, Chaucer's services at the palace were dispensed with and he went on to become a writer, as one would. Some credit his work as the starting point for English literature. People who know London will know that New Cross is very near Millwall football club.

Before anyone jumps to any conclusions, I must point out the time span between the founding of Millwall and the event that I have just described. As a lifelong Millwall supporter, I have to say that Millwall football club is famous for many things, but not for its influence on English literature.

My constituency is not home to any professional team, but the borough of Greenwich is home to Charlton Athletic. Many of my constituents support Charlton and Millwall, our local teams, and I take this opportunity to wish them both well in the forthcoming season. I look forward to a time when the reds of Charlton and the blues of Millwall compete at the top of the league in the manner of Liverpool and Everton and Manchester United and Manchester City but, this time, with the blues being the most successful team.

In accordance with the protocol of a maiden speech, I should like to pay tribute to my predecessor who is now the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley). He announced that he would not stay to contest the seat on the grounds that it was marginal and that he was too old for such a task. I assume that his campaign slogan was, "You're Never Too Old for Worthing West". I shall bear that in mind. I shall miss his "Westminster Watch" column in our local newspaper. It was written in a style that only he could manage. He represented Eltham for 22 years and made many friends during that time, and I pay a warm tribute to him.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Mr. Austin), which is a new constituency. He is a former leader of Greenwich council and is very well respected in the area. He has worked hard on behalf of the local community, and I thank him for the assistance that he has given me since I arrived in the House as a new Member. I shall endeavour to represent the people of Plumstead as he has done for the past five years, as they now form part of my Eltham constituency.

London's public transport system is crucial to the future of our capital city. From my vantage point as a worker in the industry, I have witnessed the damaging effects that the lack of investment in the infrastructure has had on people's attitudes to London. People are getting increasingly angry and frustrated about our public

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transport service. Some people find the underground too uncomfortable or too unsafe and cannot rely on the buses because of the delays caused by traffic congestion. There are also complaints about the congestion caused by too many unnecessary journeys being undertaken by road.

The London underground is vital to the well-being of the capital. Every Londoner wants to improve the environment in which they live. Each recognises the importance of the public transport system in reducing car pollution. The consumer wants safe, affordable, comfortable, reliable public transport—an integrated transport system with through ticketing for all forms of transport, door to door, with facilities for disabled access planned into the system from the start, not a belated addition implemented as costs allow.

I have a plea for all local authorities to be compelled to participate in a London-wide taxi card scheme. I make no apology for making that plea. All fleets of vehicles that are allocated local authority contracts should have wheelchair access.

Road pricing has been mooted as a possible way to combat the increase in road use, which is predicted to grow by 20 per cent. between 1991 and 2011. The number of car journeys is predicted to rise by 27 per cent. and the number of commercial vehicles by 50 per cent., while the number of bus journeys is predicted to fall by 12 per cent. Some people believe that the way to combat that problem is to introduce a pricing regime to charge drivers for using roads. There are various options, some of which have been tried in major conurbations overseas. My view is that it would be unworkable and unpopular—a poll tax on wheels.

London needs a strategic approach to bring together all the providers of transport—bus, train, taxi and the underground. We need clear objectives. How will the success of public transport be measured at the end of each year—by its profitability to a private company or by the increase in the number of train miles travelled by passengers or in the numbers using public transport?

It is impossible to overstate the financial mess that the Government have inherited. Up and down the country, there are schools in desperate need of repair, hospital trusts and health authorities in deficit to the tune of millions of pounds and an investment backlog in vital services such as the London underground. As my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport has said, London Underground estimates that investment backlog will be in the region of £1.5 billion by the end of the century.

London is the portal through which the rest of the world views our country. How we treat our capital city creates the image by which Britain is judged and visitors and investment are attracted. Our performance here has a knock-on effect throughout the country. Since the loss of the Greater London council, London has had no voice. The lack of co-ordination in the planning and delivery of services is apparent to all who wish to see it.

London's underground is in urgent need of investment to meet the challenges ahead as the millennium approaches. Wherever the resources come from, they must not be directed at the behest of the private sector. The needs of the environment and of the people of the capital are too pressing. Experience shows that, when it comes to the environment, the market is too slow to respond, if it responds at all. Investment in the London underground system will be more cost-effective if it is co-ordinated with all other forms of transport. Let us start to invest in our capital city, but let us do it with the needs of the city at the top of our agenda. Let us make London the world's premier city once again.

5.53 pm

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): It is a great pleasure to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford). We on the Conservative Benches enjoyed it enormously, particularly his comments about the age of his predecessor. I was interested to hear of the connection with the author of "The Railway Children". For the best part of 17 years, I lived within a few hundred yards of the film location of "The Railway Children". Although I wish the hon. Gentleman a happy stay in this House, I could not help but speculate that, should the time come when the Prime Minister elevates him to another House, he will have quite a tongue twister of a title to take, given his name and the name of his constituency.

As the first member of the old Transport Select Committee to speak in this debate, I congratulate you, on behalf of the other members, on your new position, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I wish you every success.

I have been disappointed by the Government's response. I had thought that we might hear how the underground system would be financed. All we heard was that they are against wholesale privatisation. I suppose that that means that partial privatisation is okay. We heard some suggestions from the Liberal Democrats about a public interest company. I can think of no better way to sum up that argument than the words of an editorial in *The Independent*, which said:

"while this might technically remove the company from the public finances, in truth it doesn't fool anyone. It is just Government borrowing by another name, and expensive to boot."

There is an irony in the debate. The tube has suffered from chronic underfunding for the best part of 50 years. The only Government to make a significant impact on the backlog was the last Conservative Government. Even after the cut in the projected expenditure, investment in the underground remains at double the level of the 1970s and 50 per cent. higher than in the 1980s.

We have seen some improvements in the tube. The hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), who is no longer in her place, asked whether I travel on the tube. I have travelled on the tube since I have been coming to London. It remains one of the fastest ways of getting about the capital. With respect to the hon. Member for Eltham, it is sometimes quicker than a taxi.

The underground has the potential to take care of our transport needs well into the next century. Its operating surplus has risen from nothing to around £200 million, and improvements are planned. It will gradually move on to a self-financing basis, but only to keep itself in a steady state. Without a substantial increase in grant or capital from elsewhere, it will not be able to do anything about the backlog.

The hon. Member for Barking talked about the overspend on the Jubilee line, caused by technical problems at Heathrow. The previous Government put aside £100 million as a contribution. When the Jubilee line extension comes into action, it will add about £499 million extra to the cost of the steady state, and

that includes the overspend. That money must come from somewhere—from the proceeds of privatisation, from extra Government grant or from the core service.

The hon. Member for Barking talked lovingly about the Metrolink, which cost around £210 million. When the Select Committee took evidence, it was suggested that, if the same formula were applied to the underground, nearly £4 billion of investment would be needed. The Government will not be able to offer such sums to the tube.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House have used the words "private finance initiative" almost like a sword or a wand, as though it will be able to take care of everything. The Minister of Transport talked lovingly about the effects of PFI projects. The new Northern line trains will come soon. There are three other projects on the line: an auto-ticketing project; a project to take care of high-voltage generation; and one to integrate radio access. All of them combined are worth only £600 million. It would be interesting if the Minister would tell us the state of progress on each of those projects.

The private finance initiative is suitable for capital work, but not for taking over main funding. After all, PFI offers a way in which we could finance the tube network, but not any new funding. Funding is the moving over of real resources. The PFI is simply rescheduling of the debt. Someone has to pick up the tab over the period. The tube needs real funding. The experts, Mr. Travers and Mr. Glaister, who have been referred to already, draw a distinction simply between finance and funding. To use the analogy of a house purchase, the building society provides the finance, but the house purchaser provides the funding. Only the purchaser puts in any real resources.

It is unlikely that the private sector will be prepared to fund inherently loss-making activities. The hard truth is that the PFI cannot make any significant contribution to providing new funds for the underground. The hon. Member for Barking said, "Do not worry. All this can be taken care of. We can generate more income from shops around our tube stations." She might have been thinking of Baker Street, Liverpool Street or Bond Street stations, but most of our tube stations are old and cramped and there is no place to put any significant increase in retail development. In the past 10 years, commercial lettings have doubled. A reasonable estimate has been made that, in the next six years, that would probably provide, say, £250 million, but it is not enough. The truth is that salvation of the rail network will not come through a combination of Spud-u-Like and Tie Rack.

The hon. Member for Barking and the Minister of Transport said how important the new strategic authority for London would be. The hon. Lady talked in terms of the London infrastructure fund that has found such favour with London First and the Corporation of the City of London. It involves a levy on the national non-domestic rate in London. She also quoted Glaister and Travers. She talked about a modest increase. Glaister and Travers estimate that a 10 per cent. yield would bring in an extra £300 million to £400 million a year. I am not entirely sure that businesses in London want to pay extra, but whether they do or not, what is beyond debate is the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke)—that such money as was raised would be regarded as part of public expenditure.

When the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced yet another of the Government's fundamental reviews a couple of weeks ago, this time of public spending, I specifically asked him whether he had any intention of changing the rules on the definition of what was and what was not public expenditure, especially in the light of expenditure on local government. He said:

> "So far as changing definitions is concerned, the House will be aware that there are no shortcuts. Fiddling definitions to achieve an end is not justified, and we do not intend to do it."—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 1152.]

The possibility of raising money through a strategic authority or the transport infrastructure fund simply does not arise.

We need action now. We know from evidence taken by the Select Committee that the previous level of investment means that there is a grave risk that we will lose people with engineering expertise from London Underground. Expansion by Railtrack means that contractors and workers will be attracted away to work on the railway network, and gradually they will lose their expertise in dealing with an underground railway.

No Government can come up with the level of investment that is required in the London underground system, because Governments will always be susceptible to competition for resources from schools and hospitals. It has been suggested that, to compensate for the activity brought about by privatisation, the Government would have to come up with about £4 billion. The tube network needs a more stable environment in which Governments do not change their minds about the level of investment. We also need privatisation to tackle the poor industrial relations that have bedevilled the tube network and done so much to damage its reputation.

Privatisation has brought some benefits to the railway, especially in my constituency. We have better services, improved conditions and smarter stations, and we know that Railtrack will invest about £16 billion over the next decade. The Government simply have to take courage and accept that they must do a U-turn. They should not worry about doing a U-turn. It is nothing in comparison with what they will have to face in the not-too-distant future. Whether they are in favour of wholesale privatisation is irrelevant. The only solution comes through privatisation. The Government may tinker about and wonder whether they require a golden share, but in a properly regulated regime they have nothing to fear from privatisation.

We should have pride in the level of services and not be so terribly hung up on who owns them. We should concentrate on matters such as prices, ticket exchange, facilities for the disabled and the renewal of stock. Those are the changes that the customer requires. We should not be so terribly worried about the level of private investment. We have to understand that the only solution is increased private involvement in the tube network. That can come, for the benefit of the customer, only through privatisation. Any other way is a short cut to disaster.

6.7 pm

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): I understand why we have this Opposition motion. It aims at an irresistible target, but it is breathtaking to have the Conservative party now riding forward to the defence of the tube.

This may be one of those stories that are not true, but it sounds so close to the reality of the involvement of many Conservative Members with the tube that I cannot

[Mr. Ken Livingstone]

help but repeat it. I recall reading an article when I was the leader of the Greater London council about a junior Minister, who for all I know may now be a member of the shadow Cabinet, who got stuck in a major traffic jam. Unable to get to his meeting with the then Prime Minister—a matter that would strike terror in the heart of anyone in those days—he led his civil servants out and rushed down the nearest tube station, only to discover a rather crowded and unpleasant train coming in. He turned to his civil servants and said, "Let's find the buffet car." The story almost has a touch of the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) about it, but I do not want to provoke him.

I seldom see Conservative Members of Parliament when I travel on the tube. Far too great a reliance on ministerial cars cuts people off from reality. That is something that will afflict my own Front-Bench colleagues. It is all too easy as one swishes along in a ministerial car not to notice the appalling conditions that the vast majority of ordinary London commuters have to put up with on the tube.

For years and years, the previous Government launched attacks on London's public transport. I do not have the slightest disagreement with their complaint that, in the 1960s, it suffered from under-investment; however, when, finally, there was an administration at the Greater London council that wanted to invest in transport, it was prevented from doing so. The previous Government took away that power from the GLC because we were spending too much.

When I intervened earlier, I pointed out that, as leader of the GLC, I lobbied the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), now the Opposition spokesman on transport, and begged that Londoners should be able to manage their own tube network without Government interference. We were prepared to pay for the modernisation and extension of the tube out of the rate base in London. That is what Londoners had voted for. The then Government used their legal powers to prevent us from doing so.

It was not just the Labour administration at the GLC that encountered problems. The previous Tory administration, under the late Sir Horace Cutler, also went to the then Labour Government and asked for extra money for the transport infrastructure. I agree with Conservative Members that the record of the previous Labour Government was lamentable. I heard my hon. Friends protest at that, but they would not have done so if they had been on the receiving end of the delegations that Labour and Tory members of the GLC took to meet Bill Rodgers, when he was Labour's Secretary of State for Transport. He turned them away and denied their request to extend the tube network.

Administrations at the GLC, Labour and Tory, asked Labour and Tory Governments, year on year, for the permission to spend increased amounts of investment on that network. Their requests were refused—not, I suspect, because Transport Ministers were opposed to them, but because of the Treasury's deathly hold on so much of government in this country. The problem for whoever runs the country is that, at the end of the day, the Treasury snuffs out any excellent ideas.

We could have had the Jubilee line operating for the past 10 years if the politicians at county hall, Labour and Conservative, had not met with obstruction from Labour and Tory Governments, and the Treasury. Any new London authority will be doomed to impotence when called on to tackle the problems that confront London if it does not have some independence from the stranglehold of the Treasury.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport, because his response to the Tory motion was the most commanding presentation of a dog's breakfast I have ever heard. I know him as an old colleague from his Socialist Campaign Group days. He probably does not believe most of what Ministers have to say these days, and I never recall him complaining about a tax and spend policy at meetings of the group in those golden days of old.

Why do we not let Londoners decide about their transport? Londoners do not want to be told that they do not want a tax and spend policy designed to improve the tube. Why do we not consult them, hurry forward the creation of a new London authority, and let Londoners decide?

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting a special tax for them?

Mr. Livingstone: If Londoners vote to pay the money through their council tax and the business rate to get the transport system that London needs, we will all benefit from that.

Since the abolition of the GLC, the big difference in the past 15 years has been the change in the business community's opinion. Once, it bitterly opposed any increase in the rate; now, its representatives often lead the demand for more investment in public transport, because they recognise the impact of a bad, congested London transport system on their profitability and competitiveness. There is an emerging consensus between Londoners and the business community in London that they would be prepared to pay for a transport system that would make living in London a lot better and make trading in London more attractive and a greater source of profits.

I do not want to speak for too long, because I know that another Opposition Member must be called before the winding-up speeches. I have never really understood my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), when he has gone on, year after year, about the West Lothian question. Sometimes that has tried my patience, but as I listened to my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, who represents a Scottish constituency, announcing that we cannot opt for a policy of tax and spend, irrespective of what Londoners think, I began to understand what my hon. Friend has gone on about. It strikes me as bizarre that a Member representing Scotland can, as Minister of Transport, tell Londoners what they can and cannot have, while Members representing London are about to be denied the right to have any say about the transport policies of Scotland.

My party must quickly work out the solution to that problem, because that type of contradiction will come up again and again. Imagine what unscrupulous, cynical, populist politicians could do with it. They could stir up anger against the Labour Government. Just 20 years ago, the National Front got 5 per cent. of the vote in London. It would be easy to run a campaign arguing that Londoners were denied a voice and that Ministers from outside our city were telling them what they could and could not do.

There is a vital and urgent need to establish an elected authority for London and to pass on to it responsibility for decisions about transport. It would be directly accountable to London and its decisions would not be filtered through Ministers who do not represent London constituencies.

I took part in GLC delegations to members of the previous Labour Government, and we often encountered a strong anti-London feeling. It was felt that it was all so easy down here and that we did not know about the real poverty in Newcastle and Liverpool. In response, the GLC and the London Boroughs Association—it was a cross-party effort—arranged for delegations of councillors from those areas to visit the east end, the most deprived part of London, to see the scale of poverty.

The House and the Government must wake up to the fact that the greatest poverty in the country is found here, in the capital city. This capital city, however, sustains the rest of the country by exporting its wealth. London, with the greatest concentration of poverty in the country, and a disastrous public transport system that is overcrowded and breaking down, is bled dry to sustain other parts of the country. Londoners are denied the right to invest properly in our own city.

I described my right hon. Friend's presentation as commanding, but I do not have the slightest doubt that we are waffling around in the middle. There are just two ways forward: we must either increase revenue from taxation in one form or another to pay for the modernisation of the tube network or privatise the tube network. There is no middle way. Some sort of semi-privatisation may be dressed up in other terms, but I remind those on the Government Front Bench that they printed 1 million leaflets that promised that, on the Friday after the election, the threat of tube privatisation would be lifted. We cannot possibly go back on that commitment.

We could privatise the tube and we could pay for that investment by reducing off-peak services and by greatly increasing fares in the long term. No business man will come along and just give Londoners a massive subsidy to modernise the tube without expecting his money back and a substantial profit on that investment. That is why it would be better to tax and spend. It is bad enough that we heard banal platitudes during the election campaign, when trying to seduce the voters, but they are not worthy of a Government who have responsibility for running a country.

This country is one of the most undertaxed in the western world. Of the 15 members of the European Union, only Portugal taxes less than we do. It is a divisive issue here, because the level of tax on the individual is painful, but corporation tax is virtually voluntary. With the election behind us, we must stop the nonsense and start telling the British people the truth. If one wants a decent tube network, decent hospitals and schools, taxes must be increased to pay for that. I will have a debate about where those taxes should fall, but it is nonsense to deny Londoners the right to choose for themselves how they pay for their public transport system.

6.18 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): As I listened to the seductive tones of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) and the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), whom I welcome back to the Opposition Front Bench, I almost believed that the good old days were back. The hon. Member for Brent, East made a speech of candour and intellectual honesty on a subject on which he is an authority. How refreshing that was and how it contrasted with the ersatz performance of the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), which went on far too long and which turned the debate almost into a soliloquy.

Luckily, we had the pleasant interlude of the distinguished maiden speech of the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford), who clearly does not need to do the knowledge before speaking on transport in London. His cheerful banter pleased everyone in the House, and he manifestly has a sense of history. He was felicitous in his name dropping, as witnessed by his reference to his distinguished predecessor, who did a runner for the coast—undoubtedly agism is not rife in Worthing, West. We are fortunate in having such a knowledgeable and courteous Member of Parliament as the hon. Gentleman.

I speak as the sole Tory survivor in the whole of west London—

Mr. Alan Clark: My entire constituency is in the "W" postal district.

Mr. Wilkinson: I am speaking of the suburbs—they do exist.

In the general election campaign, three issues came up: schools and the quality of education; hospitals and the quality of the national health service; and the future of London Underground and the quality of its services. In its campaign, Labour gave the impression to a somewhat gullible electorate—in which I include even those of my own esteemed electors who, unlike hardened veterans such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) and myself, had not endured periods of socialist administration in their political lifetime—that within a short period education would dramatically improve; hospitals would no longer suffer ward closures, diminution in the number of beds or extension of waiting lists; and, without privatisation, a great deal of extra money would magically go into the London underground system, to the benefit of the long-suffering travelling public.

I remind the House that my own constituents are deeply dependent on the London underground system. There is a rail alternative to which people can turn in the event of a strike on the underground: there are two railway stations on the Chiltern line at West Ruislip and South Ruislip, which run services into Marylebone. Otherwise, one has only one's car, and my constituents who travel by car to London, to the airport or to other places of work have a terrible job getting through the interminable jams. A really efficient London underground system is therefore essential for those in our part of north-west London.

The jury is out on the Labour Government's policy on the matter. Yesterday, after the Prime Minister's statement about the Denver summit, I raised the question of what Labour would do about the London underground. The Prime Minister was promising that, by means of its participation in an integrated transport strategy, the United Kingdom would play its part in the European Union's reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 15 per cent. by 2010. I suggested that we could therefore expect vastly greater investment in London transport, in order to get

[Mr. Wilkinson]

more people off the roads and into the tube system. I was promised a review and there is to be a White Paper on the integrated transport strategy, but—to concentrate the Labour Government's mind—I remind the House that by May next year we are to have borough elections in London. The electorate of London will be casting their judgment on the progress that Labour has made in improving, among other things, London transport.

I want to emphasise two projects for the future—both are of great importance to my constituents and of strategic importance. The first and the one that is more familiar to hon. Members is the crossrail project, which is of great importance for London's transport and for transport from beyond London into the centre and out to Essex. One arm comes down from Aylesbury, the other goes eastward from Reading, through Paddington, the City of London and Liverpool Street and on to Stratford and Essex. It would be a new high-speed transport system, which would immeasurably alleviate the problems endured by my constituents.

The project was put on ice by my right hon. and hon. Friends at the end of the previous Parliament. On 2 April 1996, the then Secretary of State for Transport made an announcement on the future of crossrail. He made three points: first, that the Government's commitment to crossrail remained, although there was no funding; secondly, that construction of crossrail was to follow the channel tunnel rail link and the Thameslink 2000 schemes; and, thirdly, that Railtrack was to be invited to express a view on the project. The programme was set out in full in a policy statement, "A Transport Strategy for London", which was published by the Government office for London and the Department of Transport in May 1996.

The document was encouraging, in that the Government emphasised the benefits that crossrail offered. London Underground remains committed to crossrail and believes that promotion of the powers under the Transport and Works Act 1992 should begin next year to ensure that work on the project begins after the channel tunnel rail link and Thameslink 2000. The alignment of the projected crossrail scheme is protected by a safeguarding directive and it is most important that the Labour Government make a definitive—and, I hope, favourable—announcement at the earliest possible date. Crossrail could transform public transport in London as no other single project could. In addition, the spur to Heathrow will be especially important if the fifth terminal comes into operation, as I hope it will.

On 2 June 1997, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) asked the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to make a statement on crossrail. The Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), responded that the Government

"will consider the future of Crossrail in the light of both Railtrack's views when received and our own priorities for transport in London."—[*Official Report*, 2 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 56.]

Crossrail should be of the highest priority.

The second project that, although more local, is important in north-west London is the projected Croxley rail link, which would extend the Metropolitan line all the way to Watford Junction railway station and there join with the main line rail services to the north-west. Again, London Underground is keen to proceed—all it lacks is the funding. I urge Her Majesty's Government in their projections of funding for London Underground to ensure that sufficient moneys—be they public or private—are available for the Croxley link. Traffic congestion in the Watford/Northwood area is acute, and the link could make an immeasurable difference. Local authorities are consulting and Railtrack is considering the implications, so I urge the Government to take a positive line.

In conclusion, I can only repeat that the electorate of London and my constituents in Ruislip-Northwood will judge the Government very much by how they address the problems of London transport in the near term, not the immediate or longer term. The problems are urgent and need to be addressed soon. I support Her Majesty's loyal Opposition in the motion that they have tabled, and I hope that the Government respond positively.

6.29 pm

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you very much for calling me. I shall address the House briefly, as one of only three remaining Conservative Members of Parliament through whose constituencies underground lines pass. We are in danger of approaching the level of extinction that applies to our former colleagues in more distant parts of the realm.

I pay tribute to the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford), which I found witty and informative. I have never listened to a maiden speech without being the wiser afterwards, and in this case the fact that Mr. Frankie Howerd, who did so much to enlighten public perception of the holy Roman empire—and in particular the city of Pompeii—is one of his constituency's favourite sons was news to me, and I appreciated being told it.

The hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) suggested that I never travelled on the underground, and he is perfectly right, but I do travel by public transport. The importance of public transport is well illustrated by the No. 19 bus, which leaves literally from the door of my flat and deposits me literally at the door of my constituency office—and very useful it is. On many occasions, it provides me and my constituents with a rolling advice bureau on wheels, which is very congenial to all of us.

All London colleagues will remember the forms that I hold in my hand, which we received in copious quantities during and just before the general election, urging us to do something about the state of the underground. I have not counted them, but in common with everyone in this place who suffered the trauma or elation of the events of the night of 1 May, I was reminded by them of a packet of ballot papers. From a purely visual estimate, I should think that there are at least 300 or 400 there. They urge us to remedy the situation in a way that would require drastic public expenditure.

I fully appreciate the point that was made by the hon. Member for Brent, East that expenditure on an enormous scale is the only remedy for the present condition of the underground. My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) pointed out the discrepancies in the speech by the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge). She covered up with the

euphemism of "bringing finance in"—whatever that means. I wrote it down because it was such an extraordinary weasel phrase.

In fact, there is no substitute for expenditure on a colossal scale. It is no use pretending that some of the money will come from the private sector by some device or other. The private sector would not go near the idea unless there were Government guarantees, which would have to be of a rate of return that was slightly—perhaps infinitesimally—better than would be achieved on other, equally safe, forms of investment. The rate would have to be equivalent to that on gilt-edged securities or higher. That means that there is concealed in all the plans a colossal measure of additional public expenditure, and there is no way out of that if the solution that is needed is to be arrived at.

I shall not talk for more than another couple of minutes on the subject of travel on the underground, but I shall read into the record the complaints that some of my constituents suffer, not from travel, but from a symptom which illustrates, if anything, the extraordinary scale of capital expenditure that will be needed. They speak of

"the serious problems affecting the covered way over the line between Kensington High Street Station and Gloucester Road Station",

which is the type of thing that must be addressed. It is not what people usually think of when capital expenditure on the underground is mentioned—signalling, rolling stock, new rails, modern ticketing devices and so on—but major capital expenditure.

Another constituent complains that in

"our house, everything moveable (windows, radiators, china and glass) rattle and shake when underground trains pass . . . We are able to recognise some trains as being what can only be described as 'thumpers'"

because those trains are so worn out that some of the wheels are flat and they have a percussion effect that makes the whole house shake.

I read out those letters because they give an idea of the amount of capital expenditure that is required to cure such complaints. The level of degradation indicated by those complaints shows that a colossal level of public spending is needed—spending that will not be put in by private sector initiatives unless Government guarantees are given. Expenditure on an enormous scale is required and, sooner or later, the Treasury and the House will have to face up to what is needed.

6.34 pm

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) on his maiden speech. It was an excellent speech, as we would expect from a London cabbie. Although I am not sure what my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) would say about his remarks, I am sure that he would appreciate the sentiments that were expressed. The hon. Gentleman spoke about Millwall football club. May I remind him that Crystal Palace got promoted to the premier league this season, not Millwall?

The House and Londoners will be disappointed in the Government's approach to the London underground in this debate. In his opening speech, the Minister offered no hope and no commitment. He initially said nothing about the options that he might or might not be considering, but when, under pressure from my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), he told us about one or two options, and it was then pointed out that all the options were revealed in *The Guardian* a few weeks ago, he said, remarkably, that he had not read about the leaks.

Let me read the report to him. *The Guardian* said—this was from a document that the Deputy Prime Minister left in the "Panorama" studio, having accused the BBC of stealing the document—

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Ottaway: Well, the documents were found in the "Panorama" studio.

The Guardian said:

"the documents disclosed that Labour, which savaged the Conservatives' plans to privatise the tube, is going well beyond its manifesto commitment. Among options being considered by Mr. Prescott are to split the underground into two companies, one responsible for stations and track and the other running the trains. This would be similar to the Conservatives' privatisation of British Rail, with Railtrack and train operating companies taking over the bulk of its activities."

The Minister said that he had not read that. The print of the headline is a good couple of inches high. I can only suggest that he gets another press officer in his Department, or that he spends a bit more time reading the stuff that is put in front of him. His statement that he had not read about the letter and that he had not read the articles was the least convincing explanation that I have ever heard from a Cabinet Minister standing at the Dispatch Box.

Old Labour will not allow privatisation, and new Labour will not allow higher spending. We are only six weeks into this Parliament, and already the Government find themselves in a fix. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) said, they have a choice: to fudge it or to admit that we were right.

The Conservative Government invested £7.8 billion in London Transport, which included the tube, and in recent years the underground increased train services to a level not witnessed in 25 years. At the same time, the Conservative Government increased the operating surplus from nothing to about £200 million a year. Only a short distance from the House is Victoria, London's busiest underground station, serving more than 77 million passengers a year.

Despite all that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) pointed out in a superb speech in a totally non-partisan way, much more remains to be done. Our aging network, which in part still relies on Victorian engineering, is under extreme pressure, which can only get worse. The reason is that Britain's economic boom had a greater impact on London than on anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

After years of economic decline, with fewer people living and working in the city, London in the 1980s underwent a remarkable recovery. Employment grew enormously. With each new job came a new passenger who required a reliable service to get to work. And they do not all come from the long-established commuter suburbs such as my constituency. With improved rail links, the travel-to-work area has expanded to the point where people commute from Grantham, Gloucester, Colchester and elsewhere. Demand for transport in the City doubled and then doubled again over the past two decades. The transport system has struggled to keep up with that demand.

[Mr. Ottaway]

The growth in demand will continue. The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has just launched a worthy campaign to relieve traffic congestion, but if she is successful in persuading people to leave their cars at home, that will merely add to the pressure on the rest of our transport system. What is more, the Government's environmental agenda, espoused by the Prime Minister, makes it quite possible that motorists will face tax rises of unusual severity in forthcoming Budgets. In that event, will the Chancellor re-invest the extra taxation so that Londoners forced off the roads will have reliable transport links; or is this just another dose of hot air from the Government—bland statements, no commitment, no cash and no hope?

Fare payers cannot be asked for limitless amounts. The taxpayer cannot be asked year on year to foot an ever-increasing bill. Each year £700 million is required to take the underground system forward—an amount which, given other demands on the Treasury, is unlikely to be found.

When in government, we advanced a number of PFIs with London Underground, but now Labour claim to have a new solution: PPPs, or private-public partnerships. But neither PFI nor PPP can be the saviour of London Underground. No Government could have pushed harder or with more enthusiasm for private investment programmes than did the former one. More than £500 million of investment through the PFI is already in place, and another £500 million was under negotiation. But as the chairman of London Underground made quite clear to the Transport Select Committee, much of the work required cannot be undertaken by private finance, however much it is dressed up as something new.

It was the hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), who says that he wants to be mayor of London, who let the cat out of the bag when he admitted that the arguments against privatisation were illogical. Privatisation is the only solution. We know that and so do the Government, but they are held to ransom by their statements in opposition, when they lined up to condemn our plans.

The spokesman at the time, the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), said that privatisation of the London underground was a

"cynical exercise to try and raise money".

He added that privatisation would put services at risk. The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions went further, suggesting that privatisation was a

"cold and calculated attempt to defraud the taxpayer",

whatever that might mean.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) says, the Government have dug themselves into a hole. Leaving the underground controlled by the public sector would betray the interests of thousands of Londoners. Privatisation would highlight the hypocrisy of a party that says one thing in opposition and then does another when in power.

When they were in opposition, Labour Members continually cried for more investment in the underground. As the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), who has now left the Chamber, pointed out, now that they are in government they are proposing a fudge that will bring neither the financial benefits nor the freedoms that privatisation would ensure. Their suggestion of public-private investment partnerships, and the irrelevant idea of exploiting retailing opportunities at stations, are quite simply implausible.

The Economist described Labour's proposals as half-baked:

"The notion that large amounts of private capital can be attracted to publicly owned, inherently loss-making urban transport systems is either naive or dishonest."

That is the nub of the argument advanced so ably by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles). For the underground to be able to invest, the private sector would have to have a controlling interest; otherwise any investment or borrowings would count against public expenditure totals, and the financial disciplines of the private sector would be lost. But to allow the private sector a controlling interest is privatisation by the back door—the very plan which the Labour party described as

"a vision which would threaten the service and fares for millions of Londoners, bringing more transport chaos to the capital".

I have some sympathy with Labour Members. In the cold grey light of dawn now that they are in power, they have to support a move which not long ago they vigorously opposed. I challenge the Minister to break away from dogma and fancy language and to admit that privatisation is the best hope for the tube.

Our proposal to privatise the tube network is the forward-thinking, radical step that will guarantee the service into the next century. The proceeds from privatisation would be re-invested to modernise the network over five years; fares would rise by no more than the rate of inflation.

The best hope for the underground was set out not in the Liberal or Labour manifestos but in the Conservative party manifesto, which contains all the sensible policies on the future of the London Underground. I urge the Government to come around to our way of thinking—

Sir Robert Smith *rose—*

Mr. Ottaway: While I welcome the Government's belated support for such a move, by opposing privatisation in February only to support it by another name in June, they have shown themselves in just six weeks to have betrayed the trust of the electorate.

6.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): This has been a truly fascinating debate, in which we have watched the bedraggled remnants of yesterday's Government attempt to come to terms with the fact that they are today's Opposition. They have also attempted to convince the House—or perhaps themselves—that they have always had an interest in, a commitment to, and a passionate concern for the future of the London underground.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) on his elevation to the Front Bench.

When I was first informed of the Opposition's intention to hold a debate on this subject—they failed to hold a single one for five long years when in government—my

reaction was to think that they might be preparing to use the occasion as an act of contrition. After 18 long years, perhaps they were finally going to apologise to Londoners for the incompetent, wasteful and destructive mismanagement of the underground network that characterised their period in office:

Unfortunately, my optimism was misplaced. Instead we have witnessed the staggering spectacle of Conservative spokesmen attempting to make political capital out of their wholly discredited proposals for the wholesale privatisation of our tube network.

I had hoped that the debate would be used to examine constructively ways of tackling the massive problems facing London Underground. That was what the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) did in a characteristically thoughtful and informed speech. He will forgive me if I write to him about signalling. I understand that the Pimlico noise is caused by worn track vibrating on the Victoria line. London Underground is dealing with the problem.

Meanwhile the right hon. Gentleman's hopes, and mine, do not seem to be in accord with those of the Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen. Their contributions consisted of three increasingly preposterous propositions. The first was that the appalling problems afflicting our underground system are in no way related to the policies of the previous Administration. Secondly, the wholesale privatisation of the tube was an inspirational concept that was foolishly and callously rejected by the people of London. Thirdly, they believe that, on finding ourselves in government, Labour Members have suddenly undergone a damascene conversion. They pretend that we now dramatically recognise the previous Administration's outstanding success, whereas previously all that we perceived was abject failure, and that we intend to embrace their much-maligned and misunderstood policy of wholesale privatisation of the tube, and to claim it as our own.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Will the Minister explain exactly what she means by "wholesale privatisation"? If the Government were to sell off separately the trains, and then the tracks and stations, would that be wholesale privatisation?

Ms Jackson: Our definition of wholesale privatisation is the debacle of rail privatisation, which serves as a lesson to all Administrations for all time on how not to proceed if they are really committed to creating a properly integrated public transport system, as this Government most certainly are.

Sir Norman Fowler: Will the Minister confirm that she has read the report—the Secretary of State apparently has not read it—on the options that the Government are considering? Are the Government considering the options that are set out, including ownership on the British Rail model?

Ms Jackson: *The Guardian*, not my right hon. Friend, claimed that my right hon. Friend was ignorant of the proposals. As my right hon. Friend said in his speech, the proposals referred to in *The Guardian* are by no means the only proposals that the Government are pursuing.

While I appreciate that the Conservative party is out of practice in opposition, I do not believe that its contributions this afternoon were the stuff of effective opposition. Conservative Members expressed the concept that London Underground's problems were in no way the result of the previous Administration's inadequacies.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) is no stranger to his present portfolio. He was the first Transport Minister and subsequently Secretary of State for Transport to be appointed by the now ennobled Lady Thatcher, way back in 1979. As he said, 21 years ago he stood at the Dispatch Box, having inherited a transport system from a Government—as we do today—facing criticism for its investment programme.

Some may say that there was some justification for that criticism. Under the previous Labour Administration, core investment had peaked at a mere £197 million. The only new line completed by the Administration, the Jubilee line, was late and over budget, and there were concerns about the age of some of the system's infrastructure.

When the right hon. Gentleman was first appointed to his post back in 1979, he pledged to tackle all those problems. Eighteen years on, as he sits on the Opposition Benches and attempts to attack our proposals, how have he and his colleagues fared? Despite the gallant attempt by the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) to defend investment over the past 18 years, on the proposals that we inherited from the Conservative party, investment in the core network is set to fall from £312 million this year to £197 million next year—precisely the same level of investment as in 1976.

That is what two decades of Conservative Government have managed to achieve for London's underground network. Not only were the previous Government unable to attain the economic growth and sound financial framework necessary to prepare our capital's transport system for a new millennium, but they have taken it back in time, not just to the early 1990s or even to the 1980s, but to the 1970s.

The Conservative party now has the gall to pretend to the people of this country that it represents a fresh start. The Labour Government from whom the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield inherited his portfolio two decades ago completed the Jubilee line, the first new underground line in the capital for a decade. By contrast, after 18 years in government, the Conservative party could not even oversee the completion of an extension to the Jubilee line. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford), in an informed, informing and highly entertaining maiden speech, revealed that, eventually, the Jubilee line extension will bring the tube to his part of London for the first time.

The core infrastructure, which was criticised when the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield was last in opposition, dates back in some instances not just to the 1970s but to the 1800s. After the events of the past two weeks, I must admit that there is little that the Conservative party could do that would amaze me, but even I am at a lost to understand how the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, who had two decades to tackle the problems facing London Underground, could dare to contemplate lecturing this Government for attempting to bring a fresh approach to the method of financing our underground system.

The Opposition called for details of how our plans for the tube differ from those proposed by yesterday's Government before the last election. According to those whose reluctance to comment on misappropriated

[Ms Jackson]

Government documents has been somewhat tempered by defeat at the ballot box, they are identical. I find it ironic that Opposition Members have become so keen to claim responsibility for Government policy when they were desperate to avoid it when in office. Getting a Minister of the previous Administration to admit that he or she had any bearing on the affairs of the nation was akin to drawing blood from a stone.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) called for clarification of the Government's proposals, but, as my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport said, we shall not outline in detail our proposals for London Underground at this stage—not because we fear an outraged reaction from the sparsely attended Opposition Benches, but for the simple reason that, when we present our proposals to the House, we intend to ensure that we get them right.

We have seen, through the ramshackle proposals that constituted rail privatisation, just what happens when policies are steamrollered through on the basis of political expediency rather than on the basis of what is right for the country. We do not intend to make the same mess of attempting to revitalise London's tube system as the previous Government made of privatising our nation's rail network. That is why we are not prepared to go into detail at this time about our plans for the tube.

Mr. Pickles *rose—*

Ms Jackson: I can tell Opposition Members hungry for more detail what our proposals will not involve. They will not involve artificially hiking up fares to give a false impression of fare stability after restructuring, as the previous Administration proposed. They will not involve squandering hundreds of millions of pounds on lawyers and ad men, as the previous Administration did, at the expense of investment in the network.

Mr. Pickles *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The Minister is not giving way.

Ms Jackson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was not aware that the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar was attempting to intervene. If he will forgive me, I shall not give way, as I have very little time.

Our plans will be implemented solely on the basis of what we believe is best for taxpayers, commuters and the country at large—not, as the previous Administration did, on the basis of what is most likely to appeal to the disciples of a bankrupt and discredited ideology.

Conservative Members said throughout the debate that they could not see the difference between the policies that we advocate and those that they would have unleashed, had they somehow been able to secure the nightmare of a fifth term in office. That is precisely the point. As my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) said in her highly informed and detailed speech, they cannot see that it is possible to examine new ways of addressing the funding of our tube system without recourse to the twin monoliths of wholesale nationalisation and wholesale privatisation. How could they? Their whole administration over the past 18 years was based on attacking the former and worshipping the latter.

That is why the private finance initiative has been such an unmitigated disaster. The only new rolling stock secured for the underground in recent years was obtained after a massive campaign, not just by hon. Members who wanted better public services for their constituents, but by private companies, which were and still are keen to provide them.

That is the problem with the Conservative party. Twenty years ago, when the right hon. Gentleman first sat on these Benches, privatisation was seen as the new way forward. While time has moved on, the right hon. Gentleman and his party are still engaged in the same rhetoric. They are still clinging to the same privatisation ideology, and still trying to persuade others that old-style privatisation is the only way.

When we come to unveil our proposals for London Underground, we will prove to the right hon. Gentleman, to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East and to the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea that there is a new way of securing investment for public services, without hurling those services into the abyss of wholesale privatisation.

The right hon. Gentleman says that we have stolen his party's ideas. We will explore, inquire and search for the ideas that will give the people of London the affordable, modern, efficient tube network that they expect and deserve. I can guarantee that we will not explore, inquire into or search the policies pursued by the Conservative Government between 1979 and 1997. The right hon. Gentleman can rest assured that the days when his party was able to influence the running of London Underground ended on 1 May. Given what we have heard from him and his colleagues in today's debate, it may be quite a while before their influence is felt again.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 146, Noes 375.

Division No. 39] **[7 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger

Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(N Essex)*
Johnson Smith,
Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merchant, Piers
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Malcolm Moss and
Mr. Nigel Waterson.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard *(Shef'ld Hallam)*
Allen, Graham *(Nottingham N)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne *(Aberd'n S)*
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Blizzard, Robert
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Thomas
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon
(Dunfermline E)
Brown, Rt Hon Nick
(Newcastle E & Wallsend)
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda
(Edinburgh Pentlands)
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dean, Ms Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Ms Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Ms Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley
(Stretford & Urmston)
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Ms Melanie
(Welwyn Hatfield)
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Ms Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny
(Wolverh'ton SW)
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*

Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Miss Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Robert
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Ms Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Ms Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Opik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Ms Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steven
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Dr Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Greg Pope and
Mr. Clive Betts.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House regrets the substantial investment backlog in the London Underground which the Government has inherited; welcomes the Government's rejection of the wholesale privatisation of the London Underground, as proposed by the previous Government; and applauds the Government's swift action on options for public-private partnerships to improve the Underground, safeguard its commitment to the public interest and guarantee value for money to taxpayers and passengers.

NHS Services (Charging)

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I inform hon. Members that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment standing in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.16 pm

Mr. John Maples (Stratford–on–Avon): I beg to move,

That this House expresses deep concern that the Government, in implementing its review of the National Health Service, has refused to rule out extending charging for NHS services, particularly the possible imposition of prescription charges for pensioners, charges for hospital hotel services and charges for visits to general practitioners.

It is some years since I spoke in the House. My absence was entirely involuntary, and I am delighted that it has been remedied recently. I represented a part of inner London in my previous incarnation, and I now represent Stratford-on-Avon. I feel fortunate to have represented both inner-city and rural seats in the House. That combination gives one a broad range of experiences and insights that is not available to many hon. Members.

Whereas Lewisham was four square miles, Stratford-on-Avon is 400 square miles—of fields as opposed to tarmac—comprising lovely villages and towns. In the middle is Stratford itself, which is perhaps one of England's most beautiful and historic towns. In future, I intend to speak often in the House about the rural economy, agriculture and development. It is a wonderful place to represent and to live.

I thought that I should say something courteous about my constituency and my predecessor. I am in an unusual position, as my predecessor is still a Member of Parliament—although he is on the wrong side of the House. When I was selected to represent the Conservative party, I promised my supporters that on television on election night they would see five words that they never expected to see: "Stratford-on-Avon: Conservative gain". My constituency had the largest Labour to Conservative swing of the night, and I understand why my predecessor did not hang around. As his defection created this opportunity for me, I remain grateful to him.

I turn now to the motion. It must amaze everyone that the Government have managed to get into such a mess on this issue so quickly, and that we should be in the position of choosing—on the first Opposition Supply day of this Parliament—to debate charges in the national health service under a Labour Government. We are debating the allegation that the Government are considering introducing charges for pensioners' prescriptions, the hotel costs of stays in hospitals and visits to general practitioners.

During the election, we showed repeatedly that Labour's sums did not add up, but few people, including even me—I am about as cynical about Labour's tax promises as one can get—could have imagined that Labour would have thought of squaring the circle by imposing new taxes on sick people.

We could shorten the debate a great deal. The Secretary of State could now—if he wants to do so, I shall give way to him—categorically deny all this. If he will now say that none of that to which I have referred is even being considered and that he rules out such charges completely, categorically and for all time, perhaps we can go home early. Does the right hon. Gentleman wish to intervene? My right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) and I will even put in a good word at the Treasury for him. We have a few friends there and we know that we are dealing with a Treasury-driven exercise. It seems, however, that that is not enough. We might even put in a good word for the Minister without Portfolio, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), because I think that he has something to do with the exercise. I think that the response was to be expected. At least I shall get to make the rest of the speech that I have prepared.

The story first appeared in the *Financial Times* on Monday 9 June in an article written by, I think, one of our most respected health commentators among journalists. The article read:

"The Department of Health's review is expected . . . to examine charges for NHS 'hotel' costs and GP visits . . . But a review of the structure of prescription charges could see the better off elderly being asked to pay."

The story was then taken up the next day by the *Daily Mail*, which made it clear that the exercise was Treasury-driven. The article stated:

"Two million pensioners may have to pay prescription charges as Labour cracks down on the NHS budget . . . The Chancellor . . . is determined"—

this is interesting—

"to slow the ballooning growth of the NHS budget".

That is not a story that we often hear from Labour Health Ministers.

Senior insiders were quoted as saying that

"the entire structure of the charges is being reviewed and non-pensioners could also face paying more. A senior Whitehall source confirmed last night that a cutback on free prescriptions was being considered . . . There may also be 'hotel-style' charges"

for stays in hospital.

Both stories clearly originated from an official civil service briefing. The journalists involved did not invent the stories, and they say as much in them.

The very next day, pulling the pieces of the puzzle together—they need to be put together because the Secretary of State has certainly not made it clear what is going on—the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced to the House what appeared to be a run-of-the-mill public spending review. There was no indication from him or the Secretary of State for Health how far-reaching it was intended to be. That did not emerge until the next day, when the Secretary of State was apparently rather indiscreet with journalists after speaking to the Institute of Health Service Managers at Cardiff.

The right hon. Gentleman did not come clean in his speech at Cardiff. Indeed, he deliberately confused the issue. The day before, his Minister of State announced a review to the House. Perhaps we were intended to confuse that announcement with the review that I am discussing. A much narrower review was announced with a named team that would examine ways in which more money might be directed to patient care.

After the Cardiff events, the cat was pretty well out of the bag. That Friday, a rescue exercise was attempted by means of a press release quoting the chief executive of the NHS and the Secretary of State as saying that the health service would remain free. But neither of them used that opportunity or has used any opportunity before or since to deny our fundamental allegation that the review would include possible charges for patients.

[Mr. John Maples]

As if to confirm our suspicions, the Secretary of State was quoted in *The Times* on 14 June as saying:

"We are going to look at charges."

How could the Secretary of State have got himself into such a mess with what is supposed to be a simple review of health service spending and public expenditure? According to the next day's edition of the *Daily Mail*, the Prime Minister had the same reaction. The article stated:

"Tony Blair is furious with Frank Dobson's 'incompetent' handling of the row over charging patients for health services. The Premier is angry that his Health Secretary confirmed the Government is considering making people pay for GP visits, staying in hospital, and forcing pensioners to pay . . . for prescriptions."

That is rather restrained language. I imagine that if that message was delivered to the Secretary of State by either the press secretary or the Minister without Portfolio, it was in rather more robust language than that used by the *Daily Mail*.

The Secretary of State may, however, have taken some comfort from the fact that the story was given fresh life and credibility by the Prime Minister during Prime Minister's Question Time on the Wednesday. We are all rather grateful to the Prime Minister for dropping into the House occasionally, taking intervals in his world lecture tour. We now understand clearly why he wanted to have only one session of Prime Minister's Question Time each week. He was planning to be in the country for only about one day a week.

We know that it must be much more agreeable cuddling up to Lionel, Helmut and Bill than to come to the House to clear up the mess left by the Secretary of State. Instead of lecturing European Heads of State on flexible labour markets—a concept that was entirely alien to the right hon. Gentleman until a few month ago—or lecturing the Americans on their environment, perhaps he should spend more time here getting right the line on the NHS.

During Prime Minister's Question Time on 18 June, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) asked the Prime Minister five times to confirm or deny the story. The Prime Minister, even by his own standards, was pretty loquacious in his answers. The first answer took 144 words but the right hon. Gentleman failed to answer the question. The second time he got down to 124 words. The third time—he must have been getting a bit rattled—he got back up to 157 words. Answers four and five consisted of 127 and 143 words respectively. On none of the five occasions, however, did the right hon. Gentleman answer the question. It was a pretty straightforward question but he took 695 words to say nothing.

We know that precis is not part of the lawyer's art, but civil servants are rather good at it. I suggest that the Prime Minister let them draft his answer next time. I suspect that it will be very short. I suspect that on 18 June the answer would have been yes.

The Prime Minister may have prevaricated, but by not denying the story he has, of course, confirmed it. There is a Treasury-led review of NHS spending that will include consideration of charging patients for services in areas where there are currently no charges.

Both my right hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench, the Members for Fylde and for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) know something about the Treasury. We all had our postgraduate educations there. I can only say to the Secretary of State that if the Treasury is in control of the exercise, it will fight its case to the wire and will win. For a start, Treasury officials were much cleverer than anyone else in the civil service.

Charging patients for services is firmly on the Government's agenda. Within six weeks of the election and of taking office, the Government are seriously considering something that, had we even hinted at it before the election, they would have raised an enormous moral hue and cry about. Perhaps that explains why the Secretary of State did not announce the review or its terms.

It has not escaped the attention of the House that the Secretary of State is more than a little sneaky with his reviews. Last Friday—a day when he knew that hardly any hon. Members would be in the House—he announced yet another review, of London hospitals. Surprisingly, however, quite a few Labour Members seemed to have advance notice.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): I made it clear on the Friday that I made an effort to get in touch with all London Members whose constituencies were affected by the four hospitals named in my statement. I personally spoke to the one Conservative Member concerned and the one Liberal. Other Liberal Members were informed and were grateful, as was the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). A number of Labour Members were also grateful.

The hon. Gentleman chides me for getting in touch with only a limited number of right hon. and hon. Members, but my actions were rather better than those of the last but one Secretary of State for Health, who sneakily announced the closure of Bart's, not in a statement on a Friday but in a written answer that was smuggled out because she was so gutless that she dare not come to the House.

Mr. Maples: I am interested that, of all the opportunities the right hon. Gentleman has had so far to intervene in my speech, he has chosen not to intervene on the substance of what we are debating. He is obviously rather sensitive. I suspect that he will make a speech not about the matters that I have raised but about something completely different. We shall see.

The Secretary of State is obviously rather sensitive about Fridays. I can only say that statements on sensitive subjects on Fridays are always regarded, justifiably, with much suspicion.

In any event, the Friday statement was part of a pattern of events. The right hon. Gentleman could have come clean and told the House what he was doing in the review of which I am speaking. After all, we are apparently in a new era of open government. Perhaps he has not heard about that. On the Tuesday after the Friday statement, however, the story had to be wrung out of the right hon. Gentleman.

On the same day, his Minister of State sent a detailed letter to hon. Members about a review of the private finance initiative in the NHS. I commend the Minister for doing so, but the Secretary of State should have done the same. Last week, the Secretary of State for Defence sent every hon. Member a letter announcing a defence review.

Reviews are becoming part of the Government's way of life, but why cannot the Secretary of State for Health be open about his, like his colleagues are about theirs?

The Secretary of State has consistently refused to explain what is happening. Only yesterday in Health questions I sought to elicit a narrowing of the gap. I asked the Under-Secretary to confirm

"that in no circumstances will the parents of young children who are ill have to contribute financially to the costs of their medical treatment".—[*Official Report*, 24 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 657.]

Even I would have thought that the Labour party could clearly confirm that, but the hon. Gentleman could not do so. Perhaps he has had some line dictated to him by the Treasury, because his answer was remarkably short for him—it is a few years since I have heard him speak, but he used to go on a bit and he got his answer into four lines. I suspect that he could not confirm that because the Government are reviewing all areas of charges.

It is conceivable that the parents of sick children will be asked to contribute financially. Would any Minister like to deny that now? Would the Secretary of State like to deny that it is on the agenda? If he will not do so, it is reasonable for us to assume that it is on the agenda.

Mr. Dobson: What about the killing of the first born?

Mr. Maples: Even the right hon. Gentleman would deny that he was going to do that.

It is no wonder that this fire refuses to die down. We have had to use a Supply day to drag the Secretary of State to the House to explain himself and his actions. The Government's job is to make decisions, not to conduct reviews. The Labour party had 18 years to think about what it was going to do with the health service, and for most of that time it did nothing but criticise our handling of the health service. When Labour finally gets into power, it does not know what it is going to do. Those 18 years apparently produced no decisions and no clear policies.

No fewer than three reviews that we know about are being undertaken by the Department of Health alone. Reviews are not decisions: they are not even substitutes for decisions. They are usually undertaken to avoid decisions and to kick problems into touch. Perhaps the Secretary of State hopes that, by the time someone throws this ball back in, he will have moved on and the problem will be his successor's—there is probably a good chance of that.

I hope that the Secretary of State will note our questions, because the House is entitled to an answer. We want to know the exact terms of the review. It is instructive that the right hon. Gentleman is not making any note of that. That is an example of the increasing arrogance with which the Government treat the House, as though it is not entitled to ask questions of the Government and of Ministers and to expect answers. If he does not answer these questions, they will be tabled for written answer very shortly. What are the terms of the review? What is its timetable for reporting? Who is conducting it? Are any Ministers directly involved, and what Departments are represented?

The Government have tabled an amendment that is designed to allow the Secretary of State to avoid dealing with the issues and to attack us instead. It gives him an excuse for not coming clean with the House. I remind him that he is now a very senior Minister, responsible for one of our great Departments of State with a budget of more than £30 billion a year. That money is voted by the House, which is entitled to explanations of how the Department is run.

I invite the Secretary of State to respond openly to the debate: if he chooses to do so, he can clear the matter up once and for all in a simple sentence. If he does not, we are entitled to stick to our temporary and provisional conclusion that the Government are considering levying new charges on patients in at least three areas: pensioners' prescriptions, hospital hotel services and visits to general practitioners.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Most people will recognise that the Government have been more open in the past month and a bit than the previous Government were in 18 years. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that it sounds odd for him to talk about Governments being open, as he penned a report for the previous Government in which he recommended that it would be best if no one said anything about their health policies for at least 12 months?

Mr. Maples: I expect that the Secretary of State will receive the same advice pretty soon if he goes on running health policy like this.

The British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing have expressed considerable concern about these proposals. Vulnerable people up and down the country will be worried about them. Even if the Secretary of State does not think that the House deserves an explanation, patients, taxpayers and people who are worried about the proposals deserve one. Apart from the merits or otherwise of introducing these charges, such an action would be a massive breach of faith with the electorate.

There is no mention of reforms to charges in Labour's manifesto. In fact, it is very short on health service reform. It simply says:

"access to it will be based on need and need alone—not on . . . ability to pay."

If that is all it is based on, why does not the Secretary of State deny these rumours and deny that he is even considering charges? He cannot.

Labour has spent much of the past 18 years anathematising the very idea of charges whenever they have been raised, suggested, introduced or discussed. It tried to scare the electorate into thinking that this was Conservative policy. What hypocrisy that will turn out to be if all along it was Labour that was planning to introduce charges.

I shall quote a little of the fire that has been directed at us on this subject in the past few years to show just how rich an irony this matter will prove to be if it were not so potentially damaging to vulnerable people. If the Secretary of State plans to introduce these or any other charges, there will be an elaborate diet of his own and his hon. Friends' words for eating. We want to give him a little look at the menu, because, if our suspicions prove to be correct, he will be force-fed with those words, and we will enjoy watching him eat them very slowly indeed.

I have quotes from a series of shadow Health Secretaries going back a long way, but we do not have to go back very far for the first statement. During the election, the then shadow Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith), said:

"A fifth Tory term will make hospitals and GP practices profit centres".

It seems that at that time his party was thinking about doing exactly that.

[Mr. Maples]

Going back a little further to February 1996, the then shadow Secretary of State for Health—*[Interruption.]* I will give way any time a Minister wants to deny that the imposition of these charges is under consideration. In February 1996, the then shadow Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), said of a rise in prescription charges:

"This is yet another hidden tax rise, taxing people who are ill. Now people on low incomes face a cruel choice between paying through the nose or doing without vital medication."

Apparently, they will have painful choices to make in a whole lot more areas if the right hon. Gentleman gets his way.

Earlier the same month, the then Leader of the Opposition, now the Prime Minister, said in one of his familiar attempts to scare voters about what the Conservatives were up to:

"A Tory fifth term is the nightmare. Will you be paying to see a doctor? . . . Will they say one thing before an election, and do another afterwards?"

How prescient it would have been, if the leader of the Conservative party had said that instead of the leader of the Labour party.

In a debate on these matters in 1995, a previous shadow Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett), said:

"they are not just a tax but a fiscal mugging. . . . we never have and never would use prescription charges as a tax on the sick".—[*Official Report*, 29 March 1995; Vol. 257, c. 1130-31.]

Not unless the sick are pensioners.

The previous shadow Secretary of State for Health was the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett), who described the

"idea of charging the sick"

as a

"disgraceful act".—[*Official Report*, 15 March 1993; Vol. 221, c. 118.]

The shadow Secretary of State for Health before that was the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook). This is a pretty complete record of all of them. He described the Health and Medicines Act 1987 as a "tawdry Bill", and said:

"The measures are objectionable . . . in themselves".

It is interesting, given what is apparently being considered in the review, that the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham, who wound up that debate, said:

"Will the Government ask health authorities to insist on charges for relatives who stay with a sick child in hospital? . . . It would be quite wrong to implement charges for relatives of children in hospital."—[*Official Report*, 7 December 1987; Vol. 124, c. 49, 100.]

Perhaps the Government will deny that that is on the agenda.

Audrey Wise (Preston): The Cystic Fibrosis Research Trust gave evidence to the Select Committee on Health about children with cystic fibrosis who need lung transplants, which is often a suitable treatment. It stated that it was unaware of any lung transplant centre that did not levy hotel charges for mothers who stayed with their children.

Mr. Maples: I think that what is under discussion now is whether the patient will have to pay hotel charges following the review.

Those are all quotes from what the present Government said about us. It is staggering hypocrisy, in the light of what is now being considered. The truth is that not we but the Government have been considering a massive extension of charges. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members sigh. If they want to deny that any of those proposals is on the agenda, I shall be happy to give way to them, but until they do I think that we are entitled to assume that the proposals are on the agenda. *[Interruption.]* The Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), nods and mutters a good deal, but yesterday he declined the opportunity to deny that sick children would be charged for hospital care.

The Government have another problem, and it is a particular problem for the Secretary of State. Ten years ago, a Labour Member of Parliament, a Frank Dobson—obviously he was nothing to do with the current Secretary of State, as they do not seem to agree on much—said in his 1987 election address:

"Labour will . . . get rid of prescription charges."

I know that 10 years is a long time, but to go from getting rid of prescription charges to extending them is quite a jump.

The same Frank Dobson was quoted in the *Morning Star*. That shows how far back we are going: I do not think that he would want to be quoted in the *Morning Star* now. On 26 May 1987, it reported:

"Forcing the sick to pay to see a doctor could become the shocking reality under a third . . . Tory term.

Charges to enter and stay in hospital . . . Frank Dobson revealed yesterday 'All Mrs. Thatcher's friends are absolutely mad on the idea.' "

It would be interesting to find out whether they are mad about the ideas that the right hon. Gentleman is now coming out with.

That was obviously based on a Department of Health press release issued a few days earlier, in which Frank Dobson said:

"The Tories know that the people of this country fear for the future of the NHS. That is why they have kept under wraps the far right ideas of charging for visiting the doctor or for staying in hospital."

There we have it.

There is one more report—in *The Guardian*, which is a bit more respectable than the *Morning Star*. It reported in April 1996:

"Labour's health spokesman, Mr. Frank Dobson, said: 'We will reduce prescription charges immediately with a view to abolition.'"

Can that be the same Frank Dobson who is now Secretary of State? Perhaps someone has been going around Holborn and St. Pancras impersonating the right hon. Gentleman, trying to make a fool of him. He was still there in 1992, however. His 1992 election address was one of those election addresses that quote constituents saying nice things, and a lady was quoted as saying:

"Frank Dobson really knows what he's on about when it comes to the NHS."

Well, that lady was right. Frank certainly knew what he was on about; he just did not tell the rest of us. I imagine that she would be very surprised to realise just how much he knew, and just how little he told her.

I suggest to the Secretary of State that that pile of words would make an awfully indigestible meal for him and his friends, but I say to him honestly that I hope that he does

not have to eat it. All that he has to do is say now that there is no way in which the review will even consider those possibilities, and that he guarantees that the Government will never charge pensioners for their prescriptions, charge patients to stay in hospital or charge people to visit their general practitioners.

The right hon. Gentleman has missed all sorts of other opportunities; perhaps he will take this one. He could deny the whole story. He could still go home early. If he denies the whole story, and states categorically that he is not considering such action and that it will not happen, I promise him that we will forget the whole thing and not mention it again. I hope that he will do that, but I somehow doubt that he will. I expect that we are about to hear not an answer to our charges or an explanation of policy, but a diatribe against the last Government and their record. We have heard that a good many times.

The Labour party is now in charge, however. The Secretary of State is famous for his bluff bullying, but we shall see it—as, I suggest, will those sitting behind him—for the smokescreen that it is, designed solely to avoid living up to the responsibilities of his office. I say to him, why not make a change and rise to the occasion for once? He should speak for the Government. He should speak like a Secretary of State, and tell us and his Back Benchers that what we have said is not true.

7.44 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): I beg to move, as amendment to the motion, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"welcomes the commitment of Her Majesty's Government to the historic principle of the National Health Service that if someone is ill or injured there will be a national health service to help, with access to it based on need, not on ability to pay or on who their general practitioner happens to be or on where they live; notes the steps which are being taken to end the internal market, which is unfair both to patients and staff and which has resulted in massive sums being consumed by bureaucracy; welcomes the shift of funds into patient care, including cancer treatment, instead of paperwork; and looks forward to further changes which will ensure that once again the National Health Service provides the best health services for all and is ready to meet the challenges of the 21st century."

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) on his election, and on his new job as shadow Health Secretary. I hope that he will bring to the task the honesty that he displayed in his most famous contribution to modern politics—the Maples report, which spelled out what the people thought of the Tory Government, in the hon. Gentleman's opinion. He reported to the then Prime Minister that the British people believed that what the Tories were saying was

"completely at odds with their experience, which led them to conclude"

that the Tories were "stupid", "out of touch" and "lying", and "didn't care"; that they had "let voters down". They had been "in government too long", were "complacent" and had

"lost a sense of direction."

They had

"failed to fulfil their promises".

For good measure, the hon. Gentleman also reported that people perceived the health reforms as

"clumsy, and believe what doctors and nurses say about them".

How right he was. He went on to suggest that the Tories should identify what he described as some killer facts about their record, and repeat them endlessly.

I have always been one to take good advice, wherever it comes from, so I have collected some killer facts about the Tory record on health. None of what I am going to say is fiction; it is all facts—the facts about the position that we have inherited from the Tories after 18 years of Tory government.

The facts are that 59 of the 100 health authorities in England ended last year in deficit, 128 of the 429 NHS trusts ended last year in deficit, 42 health authorities were judged by the Department to have serious financial problems and 55 trusts were judged to have serious financial problems. Hospital waiting lists are at an all-time record at 1,164,000. Hospital waiting lists have increased by more than 100,000 since March last year. Waiting times are rising again, and the number of people waiting for more than 12 months has increased sevenfold since last year.

Capital investment in the NHS is at its lowest for a decade. The number of emergency operations is growing faster than the number of operations for people on the waiting list. The debt that the NHS owes its suppliers is at its highest-ever level. Prescription fraud is losing the NHS more than £85 million a year. The number of complaints to the health service ombudsman is at its highest-ever level. The Government's programme to put private finance into the NHS failed to build a single hospital, but that private finance initiative programme has cost the NHS more than £30 million in fees paid to consultants—who, moreover, did not manage to produce a single hospital.

Prescription charges are now 10 times higher in real terms than they were before the last Government came to power. The maximum dental fee is now 11 times higher than it was under the last Labour Government, and in some areas it is very difficult, if not impossible, to receive dental treatment on the NHS. Those are the facts, and there is no point in the Tories' trying to deny them. It is no good their trying to avoid the truth.

As I have discovered recently, the truth is a dangerous commodity in politics. I was found out telling the truth: I was what the shadow Secretary of State called indiscreet. What a heinous crime—a politician telling the truth. The truth that I told was that, as promised in our general election manifesto, the Labour Government were conducting, in and across each Department, comprehensive reviews

"to assess how to use resources better, while rooting out waste and inefficiency".

We are organising a comprehensive review of spending by the Department of Health, the NHS and the social services departments of local authorities—and so we should when such huge sums are involved. The NHS spends £36 billion a year, about £100 million a day of taxpayers' money.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Dobson: Not yet.

I explained that the review was to be intellectually honest and thorough, and that therefore nothing was ruled out and nothing was ruled in. Of course that included charges, as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury told the House on 11 June.

Mr. Forth: Before the right hon. Gentleman leaves the subject of truth, perhaps I may give him another opportunity to indulge in the use of that commodity. On Wednesday the Prime Minister said:

"We will have a national health service restored to the basic principles of the British NHS—the health service that we founded".—[*Official Report*, 18 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 304.]

Is one of the principles of the NHS to which the Prime Minister alluded that no patient should ever be charged at the point of treatment?

Mr. Dobson: The right hon. Gentleman ought to know that there are currently charges for treatment at the point of receipt. Our election manifesto included other promises relating to the national health service. We promised:

"If you are ill or injured there will be an NHS there to help . . . access to it will be based on need and need alone, not on your ability to pay or who your GP happens to be or where you live".

Every aspect of our spending review will be judged against those criteria. The questions will be: would a particular proposal mean that access remained based on need alone or would it mean that access became related to the ability to pay? Would the introduction or the increase of a charge put people off seeking the treatment or care that they need? We intend to keep our promises, and they are the criteria that we shall use to make judgments in the review.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The Secretary of State knows, because I have said it in the House, that it is perfectly proper for an incoming Government to look at Government spending and the spending of each Department. There is no argument about that. However, the debate is about the raising of money, and it would be helpful if the Secretary of State could answer a simple question. Why have the Government decided, according to what we have heard about the review, that charging is ruled in as a way to raise money for the health service while further taxes are ruled out?

Mr. Dobson: We intend to keep all our manifesto pledges, some of which relate to income tax. I know that the hon. Gentleman's party has made some manifesto pledges in the opposite direction about tax, but as we won the election we have to keep our election promises and not his.

There is no point in the Tories bleating about prescription and other charges. They increased prescription charges tenfold and top dental charges elevenfold. They pushed through the House laws that forced pensioners to pay for eye tests and dental examinations. They also failed to deal with the unfairness and the anomalies in the current charging arrangements. As the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has told the House, we will not ignore that unfairness and the review will look at the anomalies.

I shall give some examples of anomalies that the Conservative Government were apparently quite happy to put up with. The present exemptions from charges were agreed in 1968 but much has happened since then. There is now transplant surgery. Under the 1968 arrangements, people who needed lifelong medication were supposed to get free prescriptions, but transplant patients do not even get free prescriptions for their anti-rejection drugs. Another example is that people who receive chemotherapy for cancer and who have lost their hair can get free wigs if they are in-patients but must pay for them if they are day patients.

There is also the ridiculous case of elastic support stockings. Those who need two such stockings have to pay for two prescriptions, one for each leg. That is the anomalous charging system with which the Conservative Government were apparently quite content. As we know, that system is wide open to fraud, about which the Tory Government did next to nothing. What can one say about a system about which the official report stated that more than one pharmacist conceded that they had accepted forms from men who claimed exemption on the ground of pregnancy? That is the system that the Tory Government were happy to run and which the Tory party would like to protect.

Unlike the Conservative Government, we are prepared to take action to stop the fraud that is haemorrhaging £85 million a year from the NHS. We shall incorporate anti-theft and anti-counterfeiting devices in the printing of prescription forms. We shall have a scheme to reward pharmacies which detect stolen or counterfeit prescription forms. We are working on a new criminal offence of evading a prescription charge and on a fixed penalty for non-payment. We are examining the use of an electronic data interchange system for transferring prescription information, and we want to make more effective use of information technology by the fraud investigation unit.

Mr. Maples: Will the new criminal offence apply to people who try to get out of paying their GPs for going to see them?

Mr. Dobson: If Opposition Members who were in government, one at the Treasury and the other a Secretary of State, had done anything about fraud, this year the NHS would have £85 million more to spend on patients.

Every aspect of the NHS will be carefully examined in our comprehensive review. It will be careful and thorough and will involve Health Department officials, NHS staff and people from outside both services. I and other Ministers will be involved at all stages. As I have said, we shall judge all the propositions that are put to us against the need to keep our promise that access to the national health service will be based on need and need alone and not on the ability to pay.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Dobson: I shall finish this point before giving way.

I say to hon. Members, those in the health service and others, do not judge our review by what other people say is going into it. Judge it by what comes out of it. It is a bit like judging an operation, because it is the outcome that counts.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for outlining how we should judge the

review. So that we may be better informed, will he give an undertaking to publish the cost of putting right the failings that he has enunciated? Will he also publish the cost of correcting the anomalies that he identified? We need that information to judge the validity of his review. Will he supply it?

Mr. Dobson: As I have said about three times and as I have said outside the House—causing a fracas—we shall consider everything in the review and publish such information as we think proper when we publish the outcome. I understand that every Department will publish the terms of reference of each review. That in itself will be a giant step in terms of public information about Government reviews of spending, because the Conservative Government never did that.

Mr. Forth *rose—*

Mr. Dobson: I shall not give way.

I shall accept no Tory criticism of our review. The systematic way in which we are going about the review is in marked contrast to the way that the Tory Government formulated their health policy. Their reorganisation of primary care was based on advice from a Tory doctor who was a smackhead, Dr Clive Froggatt. He advised Margaret Thatcher and successive Tory Health Secretaries, ending up with the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley). He told the *Observer* that he was taking heroin every day

"shooting up before meetings with Ministers".

He added:

"no-one in Westminster noticed anything wrong".

Conservative Members may be interested to know how he financed his heroin habit. He did it through prescription fraud, obtaining pure heroin in the names of dead or terminally ill patients. He ended up being convicted for fraud. Therefore, the Tories were advised on their major reorganisation of the NHS by a junkie and a fraudster. No wonder it is in such an organisational mess. No wonder we need a review.

Let me emphasise that the NHS is not going to stand still while the review is going on. We are getting on with keeping our election promises. We have already started cutting paperwork and unnecessary management costs, shifting the money instead into patient care. We have deferred the eighth round of fundholding and that has released £20 million from the NHS budget. That money has been redeployed. The first £10 million has gone into breast cancer diagnosis and treatment. Another £5 million is going into improving children's intensive care.

Surely everyone has to accept that that money is better spent on women and children in need than on the paperwork of fundholding, which is where the previous Government were going to spend it.

Mr. Forth: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Dobson: No, I will not.

Mr. Forth: Why not?

Mr. Dobson: Because I do not want to. Other hon. Members want to speak and this is a short debate.

We are following that up by taking further steps to reduce the flow of invoices and other costly paperwork. To end the two-tier system, we will introduce a system of common waiting lists so that people are treated on the basis of need and need alone. That was our promise in our election manifesto and we will keep it.

With the support of clinical professionals, we are encouraging new ways of improving primary care and we are developing pilot schemes for local commissioning to take the place of fundholding and health authority contracting. The Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), will make an announcement about that shortly.

We have been sorting out the shambles that the Tory Government used to grace with the title "private finance initiative". They could have been prosecuted under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968, because they displayed no initiative and raised no finance. Far from keeping things private, they repeatedly made misleading public statements. They boasted about using the PFI to build hospitals and never built any. We will get them built using the PFI.

As our manifesto also promised, we are taking action against tobacco advertising. On 14 July, we are hosting an international summit on tobacco, which is being organised by the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell). We are also keeping our promise to establish an independent food standards agency.

We have commenced a drive to reduce inequalities in health. Poor people are ill more often and die sooner, and the ultimate inequality is the difference between being alive and being dead. Under the previous Government, the words "inequalities in health" were described as politically incorrect and the only phrase that civil servants were allowed to use in the Department of Health was "variations in health". The previous Government could not even stand the truth on that.

We have established an NHS efficiency task force to root out inefficiency and to identify savings throughout the NHS. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), is reviewing long-term care for elderly people and other groups, and he is making a series of visits throughout the country to promote more and better co-operation between health authorities, trusts and local authorities.

One other major problem that we inherited was the fear of abuse and assault among staff in the health service. Recently, I went to Queen Alexandra hospital in Portsmouth, where I spoke to a nurse who had been slashed a year ago and where I was told of a pregnant woman consultant who, in the accident and emergency department, was kicked in the belly by a lout who was drunk.

We are determined to do something about that. In conjunction with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, I am determined to ensure that the criminal justice system offers the maximum protection to staff and the maximum deterrent to loutish behaviour. As I have said, I give notice that people who start off by assaulting the "hello nurse" will end up in the arms of the "cheerio gaoler", and I want them to stay there for a long time.

Mr. Forth: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Dobson: No, I will not.

[Mr. Dobson]

I do not have time this evening to spell out all we have been doing to change the health service, to change it for the better and—unlike the previous Government—to change it with the agreement and enthusiasm of the staff involved, but that is what we are determined to do and what we are doing.

It is nearly 50 years since the Labour Government founded the national health service, in the teeth of opposition from the Tory party. They founded it on the basis that the best health services should be available to all: that quality and equality should be available to all. Those principles were put into practice. The NHS worked—until recently—exceptionally well.

The system was fair to patients and, because of that, it was comfortable for staff to run it. It was based on need, so it was clinically sound; people were treated because they needed to be treated. It was managerially straightforward because such a system kept paperwork to a minimum. As a result of the Tory changes, the NHS developed into a two-tier system that was unfair to patients, repugnant to the staff who had to run it and managerially complex and wasteful. That is why we are ending the internal market, as we promised in our manifesto.

Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of the national health service, which has served our country so well for so long. People everywhere will want to celebrate that anniversary; so we should and so we will. We will pay tribute to the founders of the NHS and to the generations of dedicated people who have made it work, but we must resist the temptation to spend the coming year looking back.

That is not what the founders of the health service did. They looked forward. They drew on their experience of what had gone before and they married that experience to their hopes of better things to come. That is what we must do: take stock of what we have, discard what does not work and build on what does. It is our job to fashion a health service for the future—for the next 50 years.

That is what this new Labour Government will do. The NHS is in the hands of the party that founded it and that believes in it. At the end of this Parliament, the NHS will be fit for the 21st century. It will provide the best health services for all—quality and equality, the watchwords of the Labour party, old and new.

8.7 pm

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): I heard an interesting speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) and I expected something better from the Secretary of State for Health. After all, what he suggested—the sum of the reviews that are likely to come up—is that £80 million should be saved here and that £300 million should be saved somewhere else. Obviously, it is useful to be able to save some money, but what he has announced so far is peanuts in comparison with the NHS's total bill, of about £43.5 billion.

The Secretary of State's words would have carried more conviction if, when he said that nothing would be ruled out, he had outlined the sort of philosophical approach that he would bring to that phrase "nothing is ruled out". I should like to suggest to him some of the things that we would expect to come out of the review.

Frankly, the Secretary of State's speech was a disgrace to the House and to the way in which we run our health service. It was based on the same old party political battle. We claim to have made some progress in the pursuit of better health standards and of an improved health service. Anyone considering the standards that we have today, with the variety of operations, surgical techniques and the rest of it, would agree that we have made enormous strides, but, despite the innovations and improvements that have been made over many years, all we have had is an attack on what was achieved by the previous Government.

Basically, the attack has been based on the concept that what was introduced when the health service first came into being in this country, the principles that motivated it and the manner in which we financed it, could not in any sense be sacrificed.

The principles are fine—a service free at the point of demand. But do the Government really expect to be able to finance the further expectations of Britain's patients without changing the way in which those services are delivered? No country that examines the way in which we finance health care regards ours as the envy of the world. We know that, when the NHS started, patients' needs were simple compared with those of today. That is one reason why there has been such a huge escalation in costs.

The NHS had a budget of some £9 billion in 1979 when the Conservative Government took office and it is now spending £43.5 billion. Do the Government really expect to continue to meet some of their targets under the present system of financing the NHS? Do any of members of the Government believe that it can be done? Neither the Secretary of State nor his colleagues have accepted that there might be some need to reassess the financing of the NHS; on the contrary, they have consistently rubbished every achievement of the previous Government.

We know why the NHS, as financed, forces any Chancellor of the Exchequer to face up to enormous financial difficulties. First, there are more elderly people. The cost of providing care for elderly people has escalated beyond the imagination of those who founded the NHS. Secondly, the explosion of modern medical technology and diagnostic techniques has far surpassed anything that many envisaged when the NHS was introduced. Thirdly, as I have mentioned, as a consequence of the progress that has been made, expectations have risen.

Nothing that I have heard today has given me reason to believe that the Government understand that there is no point in trying to rubbish the previous Government's record at a time when there was a massive explosion in health expenditure in Britain unless nothing really is to be ruled out.

I can remember when there were cuts in the hospital building programme, not the increases that we have seen since 1979. I can remember when prescription charges were first introduced. I have seen not cuts but an increase in real terms in public expenditure on the NHS, the like of which was never achieved by a Labour Administration.

Mr. Hugh Bayley (City of York): That is rubbish. It is not true.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: It is not rubbish. There may have been the odd year when there were cuts. I have heard the hon. Gentleman speak on this subject, but he

well knows that no Labour Government had to face the explosion in the number of elderly people and in new technology that has occurred. Instead, the Labour Government have made a political football of the NHS.

Not one country that has sent an expert to Britain has followed our example of trying to finance the huge explosion in medical expenditure almost exclusively out of public funding. I would take more heart if the Secretary of State showed a little more humility as he approached his task, rather than trying to kid us that nothing will really change.

The right hon. Gentleman, like his predecessors, accuses us of not spending as much on health care as other countries, but he knows very well that, unlike us, other countries have not accepted that there should be a gap between private and public expenditure. They have managed to bring the private sector into the funding of their public health service, either through non-profit organisations or through private insurance and a raft of other methods. There is not the divide that exists in Britain.

I hope that, when the right hon. Gentleman comes to rule nothing out, he will examine the role of the friendly societies, the mutual societies and non-profit organisations and groups that try to run some of our hospitals. In the 19th century, they and the trade unions played their part, and they are only too willing to try to play their part today in bringing additional funding to the NHS.

Instead of denying to elderly people the right to some tax relief from the age of 60, the Government should encourage people through the tax system to take on some responsibility for their own health care. Unless people take on that responsibility, as people do in France, Holland, Spain and throughout the western world, the only way in which the needs of modern health care can be met will be through the taxpayer, and I do not believe that that will work.

The right hon. Gentleman knows that, despite the huge increase in expenditure, we face a serious problem. Britain has fewer consultants than Holland. The Government might try to discover why we go through so many GPs and why, compared with America and elsewhere in Europe, we do not have enough specialists. That is a problem that needs tackling face to face with the medical profession.

The Government might wonder why there are recruitment problems in the NHS. That might have something to do with the pay structure and doctors' working hours. They might also consider the disproportionate influx of doctors from overseas. When those doctors now in their 50s retire, the Government will have to find replacements for them. Will they come from overseas or will the Government increase expenditure on the training of medical students and attract more people to the profession? There are weaknesses in today's NHS, and I have heard nothing from the right hon. Gentleman about that.

I come now to a matter that I hope the Government will recognise deserves their attention as well as that of anyone else with an interest in the NHS. Why has the Labour party always regarded any form of health provision outside the NHS as, by definition, tainted with capitalism or private profit? That could not be further from the truth. I have here a document giving instances of how it is possible today for people, although on a smaller scale than one would like, to give professional and financial help to the health service. It is a document written by Fabians called "Towards a More Cooperative Society: Ideas on the Future of the British Labour Movement and Independent Healthcare".

Why does the right hon. Gentleman not give some obeisance to such a document? Perhaps he wants to discard it, or perhaps it is the sort of approach that he would like to see introduced. It would have been better if he had shown some humility instead of indulging in the usual rabble rousing, saying how everything is rotten under the present system. It can be improved, and he knows how. I assume that some Labour Members believe that something of that nature can be done.

The Secretary of State for National Heritage, the right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith), welcomed participation by the private sector. In *The Times* of 8 May 1996, he said:

> "Surely it is time to get away from the sterile battle lines of public and private and instead look to how the two can best work together in the interests of the citizen—and in the interests of all citizens, at that."

The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) and Mr. Roger Liddell claimed in their book "The Blair Revolution":

> "New Labour's objective should be efficiency, diversity and innovation in the provision of public services—not privatisation for its own sake. Service providers will not necessarily be conventional private companies. They might be employee-owned or they might be co-operatives. Many will be in the voluntary sector . . . what is most desirable is the emergence of a new generation of 'social entrepreneurs'."

In other words, the distinction between private and public becomes irrelevant. That, I hope, is part of the thinking that leads the Secretary of State for Health to say that nothing is ruled out.

How encouraging it would be if, some months from now, after this comprehensive review, the right hon. Gentleman came back to the basic principle and the Labour party turned its back on the old-fashioned socialist dogma, according to which the health service can be safe in its hands only if it is financed almost exclusively by the taxpayer. I hope that the Labour party will come to accept the spirit behind the reforms that have been introduced slowly and steadily—too slowly, in my opinion—by the previous Government.

If that is the message that comes forth today, although I doubt it, I hope that it will be the first important step in taking the health service out of the rows that we have in politics today, and that confuse patients and people who work in the medical profession. They hate being made into a political football. I hope that, in the next few months, that will end.

8.20 pm

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak. I am pleased to be given the opportunity to speak on a subject that is of concern to my constituents and about which I have received many letters. I also have relevant experience of the subject in that, until the good people of Dartford elected me on 1 May, I was a full-time, non-fundholding general practitioner in the national health service. I know first hand how important it is to patients that the NHS is there to help them.

[Dr. Howard Stoate]

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on his eloquent statement on how the NHS will be safeguarded and, indeed, improved under his stewardship. However, as this is my maiden speech, I should like to begin by paying tribute to my predecessors as Members of Parliament for Dartford since 1945 before making my substantive points.

Norman Dodds was elected in the landslide victory of 1945, which many thought would never be repeated—until the night of 1 May this year. In 1955, Sydney Irving began his first term as the Member of Parliament for Dartford. He was a good friend of mine and a colleague on Dartford borough council. I have followed his example in holding the position of chair of finance on the council and now as Member of Parliament for Dartford.

Sydney was loved and respected in Dartford. He was also admired in the House as a kind and intelligent parliamentarian. He rose to become a Deputy Speaker, before his defeat in 1979 when he became Lord Irving and moved to another place.

My immediate predecessor was Bob Dunn, who held the seat for 18 years from 1979. He held office as a junior Minister in the Conservative Government and served on the executive of the 1922 Committee. He was well respected in Dartford as a hard-working constituency Member of Parliament who always did his best for the people he served. I know that he took a close interest in many of the problems that were brought to him, and I hope to emulate his example and work hard for the people I serve.

Bob Dunn boasted in his election address that he had written more than 60,000 letters on behalf of his constituents during the time that he was in office. As well as seeking to help his constituents, I am sure that that was a valiant effort on his part to support the paper industry in Dartford, which has existed since Britain's first commercially successful paper industry was built in the town as long ago as 1588.

That brings me to the history of Dartford, which is probably best known as the southern end of the tunnel and bridge crossings that carry the M25 across the Thames. Dartford is, however, centred on the crossing of another river, the Darent. It was an important post on one of the earliest Roman roads to be built in Britain. Watling street joins London to the coast and continues to be the name of a major artery through the town.

Dartford continues to develop and there are still indications, in the forms of buildings and street names, of many of the ages in which the town thrived. The manor of Dartford was the source of taxes amounting to £82.12s, according to the Domesday book. I am sure that that compares favourably with the council tax that I set with my colleagues earlier this year, and I am convinced that the Labour council provides better services for the people of Dartford than they would have received in the 11th century.

The constituency is diverse and extends from the industrial banks of the Thames to the villages of rural Kent. The town reflects that diversity and looks two ways from its position between London and the coast. It is 15 miles from London, and many people commute to work in the City. It is also at the heart of the Thames gateway, which is the link to Europe from many parts of the country.

Dartford has a history as a centre for innovation. Richard Trevithick, famous for inventing the first railway locomotive, lived and worked in the town. He came to Dartford to work for a company that continues to have a prominent place in the town—J. and E. Hall Ltd. The tradition of innovation and commercial success continues to the present day with the presence of a major plant of Glaxo Wellcome. Dartford is also the home of Electrosonics, a company at the forefront of technology in lighting and audio-visual displays.

Amid this wealth of industry and commerce, Dartford can also claim to be a centre of culture. As well as its own theatre—the Orchard—Dartford was the home of Mick Jagger, who was educated at one of the constituency's schools. He now has a performing arts centre named after him.

I now move on to the subject of the debate—charging for NHS care. As a full-time GP until the election on 1 May, I welcome the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State of a thorough and wide-ranging review of the national health service. It has been a major backbone of the welfare state since its inception in 1948, and I believe that it still offers the best system of health care in the world. However, it is overdue for review.

One of my particular concerns—a point touched on by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—relates to the inconsistencies among the various exemptions from prescription charges. Let us consider the example of two patients whom I have treated personally. They have both suffered from asthma for many years and have always had to pay for their drugs on prescription. One of them has since developed hypothyroidism and, as a result, has become exempt from prescription charges—not just for her thyroid disease but for the drugs required for her asthma treatment. The other has developed hyperthyroidism and now suffers the double cost of paying for the drugs to treat that condition while continuing to pay for drugs for her asthma.

There is some logic in the history of this anomaly, in that replacement therapies are generally exempt from charges, whereas treatments for conditions of excess are not. As hon. Members are painfully aware, one usually pays for one's excesses sooner or later, and that philosophy certainly holds true for drugs. However, this rationale has been blurred by time, and conditions such as epilepsy and fistulae, neither of which involves replacement therapy, attract exemptions. Those differences are difficult to comprehend, and I know from experience that they anger patients who cannot understand why treatment is, or is not, exempt. GPs and pharmacists find it hard to explain and administer a system that is, at best, outdated and inconsistent and, at worst, unfair and that clearly penalises some people.

Multiple prescription charges are also a problem for patients. Hormone replacement therapy is an example. It is an increasingly popular therapy, being effective for both the treatment and prevention of disease. Women on HRT suffer less osteoporosis in later life. As well as decreasing the personal suffering of women who have fewer fractures as a result of that treatment, it saves significant sums for the NHS by reducing the number of women who need hospital treatment for fractured hips.

A number of different drug regimens is available, and different types suit different women. It is important for the patient and her doctor to identify the correct one if the

HRT is to be effective. For sound medical reasons, some of these therapies require the prescription of one drug, while others require a combination of two. Simply as a result of an appropriate, but different, type of HRT required, one woman can face charges twice those facing another.

Despite the exemptions for pensioners and people on benefits, I have too often been asked by patients to advise them which of two or three items prescribed they should obtain as they cannot afford more than one prescription charge. That presents a great dilemma for health professionals who have prescribed drugs in accordance with their best abilities but are asked to judge which would be the most appropriate for the patient. That is obviously second best and unsatisfactory.

The anomalies which I have mentioned have existed for many years and were not adequately addressed by the previous Government. The increases in prescription charges have not helped. At this point, I beg to differ with my right hon. Friend. In fact, prescription charges have risen from 20p in 1979 to £5.65 this year—an increase of 2,825 per cent., which is well above the increase in inflation for that period. According to my research, an increase based on inflation would leave prescription charges at slightly less than 60p today.

I welcome the proposed review and the commitment of my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health to care provided on the basis of clinical need, not on the ability to pay.

8.28 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I am happy to follow the hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate). There has been a great influx of medics to the House. I am surrounded by them on our Benches. There are others on the Government Benches, although I am not sure whether there are any on the Conservative Benches. I am glad that there are some of us lay people left.

The hon. Member for Dartford and I are linked by one esoteric political fact that he may not know. By sweeping away his immediate predecessor, he joins the citizens of my borough, who swept the same predecessor away from Southwark borough council, where he was previously a Conservative councillor. That is now pretty well a no-go area for Tories. As part of the progressive movements in the south-east of England, I share some of his delight and wish him well. Dartford always strikes me as having a dilemma, not knowing whether it is outer London or deepest Kent, or something between. I have been there periodically and I am sure that it will benefit from his assiduous representation here. I hope that he enjoys his time here greatly.

During the general election campaign, members of the Labour party claimed that pensions would not be safe with the Tories. They wanted people to believe that, as the present Prime Minister said,

"A vote for the Tories is a vote to get rid of the state pension."

They were wrong. That was an unfair and disreputable allegation that was not founded on facts, but it unjustifiably frightened people. Today we are dealing with another allegation—that the Labour Government are thinking of charging people for a range of health service functions.

The difference between the allegation about the state pension being at risk under the Tories and that about charging in the national health service is that this one does not come from the Opposition, but is based on a Government statement. Today's debate is self-induced by the Government. The issue is on the agenda because the Government put it there, telling the country that they were going to have a review of charges in the national health service. The Government may not like the choice of subject for the first Opposition day debate, but it is their fault.

It is also a paradox that the Conservative party should choose the NHS as the subject of its first attack on the Labour party.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: Why not?

Mr. Hughes: Because for a long time, certainly until about three years ago, the NHS was not regarded as safe in the hands of the Tory party. Lady Thatcher's actions gave no great credibility to the claim that the health service would be safe in Tory hands. To his credit, her successor as Prime Minister tried hard to ensure that the NHS was seen to be as strongly supported and cared for by the Tories as by other parties.

Although there were many reasons for us to criticise the Tory Government on health—the two-tier system, the differing speed of treatment depending on who a patient's general practitioner was and the differing access to the health service depending on where a patient lived—I have never alleged that the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) sought to do other than to preserve the NHS as a service paid for through taxation, or that he intended to privatise it. That was another unjustifiable allegation.

I did not know the precise date until my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) went round the corner just now to check, but I can now confirm that it was on 10 May 1951—seven days before I was born—that the then Labour Government passed

"An Act to authorise the making and recovery of charges in respect of certain dental and optical appliances under the National Health Service Act, 1946, and the National Health Service (Scotland) Act, 1947".

There have been charges in the NHS since the first post-war Labour Government. They were fought about in the post-war Labour party, but in the end the Labour Government introduced both the facility to charge and some charges. Of course they have been extended. They were supported and retained by the Labour Government in the 1970s and then extended again—in our view unacceptably—by the Tory Government under Lady Thatcher, who introduced charges for dental checks and optical tests for people who wanted to check whether they needed treatment.

Let us strip away the pretence. There have been charges in the health service since its inception. That is why it is perfectly proper for a new Government to consider charges. As one of the authors of the health section of our manifesto and a member of our policy committee, I made sure that our policies on health were worded correctly. We had a manifesto commitment at the election to freeze prescription charges, but then to review them. There are clearly all sorts of anomalies in the system of prescription charges. I have been in Committees that have addressed the matter, but never dealt with it.

[Mr. Hughes]

Having also considered charges for eye tests and dental checks, we went into the election with the clear view that, on balance, they ought to go. People understood that we made a costed commitment to abolish charges for dental and eye checks. There may be a debate about whether that was right, but we carried out a review and came to that conclusion.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I want to draw my hon. Friend's attention to an interesting answer to a written question that I received today, which is relevant to the debate. Does he agree that eye test charges deter people from taking the opportunity of having a regular eye check and therefore from gaining the health benefit that they would derive from it, and that free eye tests are a sound investment in preventive health care? Does he therefore share my surprise that, in the written answer that I received today, Ministers admitted that they have not even drawn up the terms of reference for a review of eye test charges and that no research has been commissioned? That seems strange.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the charges should be ended now, not later? More than 500,000 people over the age of 60 are not having regular eye tests. They are running the risk of losing their sight and will cost the health service far more as a consequence.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I remind the House that interventions must be brief and to the point.

Mr. Hughes: My hon. Friend was getting carried away by the novelty of being able to make an intervention, but his point was valid. [HON. MEMBERS: "But long-winded."] No. He was referring to a ministerial answer. I do not know and the Minister on the Front Bench now may not know precisely what the Chancellor will say next week. Indeed, I hope for his sake that he does not, because such matters are meant to be kept in the Treasury. However, the Chancellor has the option to deal with some of those matters next week.

One of the valid criticisms of the Government's review is that it appears to have no terms of reference apart from the generic phrase, "Nothing is ruled in and nothing is ruled out." There is a problem with that—it is not true. Of course it is appropriate to review spending in the NHS. I sought to put that point to the Secretary of State earlier and the Minister knows that I share his view. Money may be wastefully spent on all sorts of things, although I believe that the NHS is pretty well squeezed down because the Tory Government required it to cut costs year on year. However, we are talking not about expenditure but about raising revenue, and I have to tell Ministers on the Treasury Bench that they are different things.

Revenue is raised for the health service traditionally from only two sources—taxes or charges. I am not aware that significant amounts of money come in in any other way. The NHS can of course sell land if it is surplus to requirements and charge for private services that it contracts out, but the fundamental sources of revenue are taxes and charges. So today we need to hear where the Government stand on both those things. Sadly, and unfortunately for the Government, they have fudged the issue on both.

The argument is made even easier for Opposition Members. When the Labour party was in opposition only a year ago, it knew the score as well as it knows the score now. The right hon. Member for Edinburgh, Central (Mr. Darling), now the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, said in the Budget debate last November:

"a year after the general election"—

he was looking at the Red Book for the coming year—

"we find that spending on health is set to be reduced in real terms. . . . It is abundantly clear in the Red Book that public spending on the health service is due to be reduced in real terms."—[*Official Report*, 3 December 1996; Vol. 286, c. 896.]

The present Prime Minister, then the Leader of the Opposition, said earlier in the Budget debates:

"the Department of Health's actual total spending in the year after next . . . will in fact fall by 0.7 per cent."—[*Official Report*, 26 November 1996; Vol. 286, c. 176.]

If that was true then, to some of us it was bizarre that, until about a week before the election campaign began, the Labour party was committed to spending on the health service that was below even that of the then Tory Government. In a belated conversion—in Essex, if I remember correctly—the present Chancellor decided that he would up the amount of tax and spending to which the Labour party was committed to the same as that to which the Tories were committed. It is clearly not enough.

I do not believe that hon. Members from any party will find a single constituent who believes that a projected increase in health service spending of 0.2 per cent. per year for the next two years is enough when we have had 3 per cent. per year for the past five years. So someone has to grasp the nettle and say that more money must be collected from somewhere. It is no good waiting until the year after the year after next.

We have a deficit this year in the health service of about £300 million. The Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), has admitted it. He asked the questions when he was shadowing the health team in the previous Government.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): No.

Mr. Hughes: I shall give way to the Minister if he wishes. The figures on trusts and authorities at the end of the last financial year show a deficit of £300 million. If the Minister wants to correct me, I stand to be corrected. There has been a cumulative pattern. In the past few years, by all sorts of funny dealings, health authorities and trusts have had to borrow against the money ahead of them to keep themselves afloat. They have a duty to balance their budgets. That money could be found now and the debts could be paid off, but it can be found only from charges or from taxes.

My colleagues and I have said today, as we said before the election, that the money ought to be found by increasing taxes. Even if the Government want to hold to their commitment not to increase income tax, when the Chancellor comes to the House next week, he ought to find other taxes by which he can raise money for the health service. We offered to the Government and we offer them again the suggestion of an increase in employers' national insurance contributions, so that everything given to an employee as a perk as opposed to salary is chargeable. That would raise about £250 million

according to Treasury figures and more than £300 million according to our figures. The Government could put extra tax on cigarettes. According to the last Government figures, 5p on a packet of cigarettes produced about £200 million. That could make free dental and eye checks available again.

I am not telling the Chancellor to do either of the specific things that I have suggested, but the immediate need is not for the end-product of a review with no terms of reference, but to bring some money into the health service. If that does not happen, the Government can have a wonderful review. They can save money and in two or three years we may get the benefit of those savings. But the review will not benefit now the people who are waiting for 18 months between seeing a consultant and being treated. It will not deliver for the many people who are not being treated by the NHS today.

Another nonsense was again confirmed by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury the other day. There was a bit of a wobble in the Government at the weekend because it looked for a while as if they might change their position. Even if Government policy is successful—I hope that it is—and the social security bill goes down and more people go back to work—I hope that they do—we shall not be able to transfer the money saved from the Department of Social Security to the Department of Health. That is lunacy. Even if one is being the iron Chancellor and saying that the Government will not increase public expenditure overall above the Tory planned levels, it is nonsense not to be willing to spend the £30 million, £40 million or £50 million saved from one Department when people are knocking at the door of another.

I remember when the Prime Minister said that Labour would never put dogma before children's education. I ask the Minister to pass on personally, before Wednesday, my request to the Prime Minister and to the Chancellor that they should say that Labour will never put dogma before patients' health. It is dogma, and dogma alone, which prevents the Labour party from saying to the House, "We have inherited certain conditions, but patients and youngsters at school are the priority for the country, and we must produce some more money for them." Political U-turns can be popular. To say that one is wrong and to change before it is too late is better done early, before the winter comes and people are waiting on trolleys, and the Government find themselves under attacks similar to those made against the previous Government. I hope that the Government undertake that change.

I have a few questions that relate to where the necessary money will come from. The Government have made an honourable commitment to reduce the number of people on waiting lists by 100,000. How will we know when that is achieved? If the waiting lists go up by 500,000, will the Government then say, "Ah, that figure should have been 600,000." We need a few rules to judge how Government money will reduce the waiting list by 100,000 people.

The Government have also said that they will get rid of the Tory internal market. The Minister knows that I share his view about that, but I want to know when and how it will be possible for the constituents of Southwark, Darlington, Dartford and all the rest to receive the same treatment from their GPs, irrespective of whether they are fundholders.

There is also the mystery about the private finance initiative. First of all the Government said that they were against it, then they were for it and now they do not know. Eventually, the Government will have to come up with a clear view about a proper policy of public-private partnership in the health service. I am absolutely convinced that the Minister does not think that the PFI is wonderful, although I know that he will have to let a couple of schemes through on the nod, because some are banging at the door to be agreed. We must have a stable system that provides secure finance for capital expenditure in the health service, and that will not achieved by the PFI.

As for charges, I want to put my cards on the table. The Government have quoted their manifesto commitment, so let me do the same:

> "Labour commits itself anew to the historic principle: that if you are ill or injured there will be a national health service there to help; and access to it will be based on need and need alone—not on your ability to pay, or on who your GP happens to be or on where you live."

That pledge has some significant implications. It means that the Government should rule out now that people would be charged to see their GP or hospital doctor. If one was charged, by definition the NHS would be governed by payment at the point of access, and would not be free.

The Government have also not addressed what will happen to a person who needs a particular drug, which he normally has to pay for on prescription. According to the Labour manifesto statement, if that person has a clinical need or a health need for that drug, it should be free. According to the press release of 13 June, the Labour party pledged that NHS care would be available to all according to need and would be free at the point of use.

If the NHS was bizarre enough to plan for someone to stay on a water bed in a five-star hotel while waiting for an operation, there is all the difference in the world between charging for that, which has nothing to do with health need, or charging for cosmetic treatment in terms of the surgery involved or the appliances used—again, nothing to do with health need—and charging people for things that they need because of a clinical condition. That is the test.

We believe that the Labour Government should have been able to say that there would a review of spending and charging, but that they had some principles to which they would adhere. They should make it clear now that they will not charge for the health care that the NHS provides, because that will be funded by taxation.

We thought about those matters before the election. I agree with the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples): the Labour party has had 18 years to think about what it would do when in government and, having arrived after 18 years' preparation, it is a bit thin, weak and inadequate for it to come to the country and say, "We know there is a problem and we know we need the money, but we haven't got a clue yet about how we're going to raise it." That just ain't no answer. It really is inadequate.

Two thirds of my constituents are on welfare benefits; 25 per cent. are out of work; and I probably represent fewer people with private health care—apart from those in the new riverside developments—than any other Member of Parliament. My constituents are troubled by

[Mr. Hughes]

the thought that the Labour party has not sorted out its line on those matters and is now introducing an agenda item that had not previously been thought of.

In conclusion, I offer the Minister some suggestions. Tell the Chancellor to raise some taxes in the Budget next week. For example, about £500 million would be relatively painless, and I gave two suggestions earlier on how that could be done. Fund a moratorium on London and outside London reductions in service, so that we can see what is going on before planning what we do next. *[Interruption.]* I am asked how much that would cost; the answer is that it would cost about £185 million. Merge trusts in the many places around the country where separate community and acute trusts are not needed and we shall save a lot of money.

Move as the Government want to do, but as quickly as possible, to five-year contracts between trust and health authority. Replace local with national pay bargaining and establish a single pay review body. Collect the money from the private sector to cover the cost of training all the people who have left the NHS—private companies have never been charged the full cost of that. Implement the recommendations of the Select Committee on Health, on fair distribution of resources around the country. Look broadly at private finance options, but do not limit that to the PFI. Finally, the Government should put their hands up and admit that there will always be rationing in the health service—it is a matter not of whether, but of how.

This month, it is every commentator's comment that the Labour party is wrong to think of reviewing charges but not of raising taxes. Labour has come to government with very modest commitments on health—they are far too modest and they are inadequate to the task. A review of charging that rules nothing in and nothing out without facing the real issue of raising money through taxes—which is the way in which the NHS should be funded—will not just disappoint the Government's supporters. It might, as it did for the Canadian Government when they did the same, result in a much speedier ejection from office than this Government bargained for.

8.52 pm

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech this evening. I must begin by apologising to the Opposition for using a short period of the Supply day in order to obey the normal conventions governing such speeches. I hope that I will be forgiven for that.

In connection with those conventions, I want to introduce myself as the Member of Parliament for Hemel Hempstead. Of the four people who have been closely associated with the seat, three still have the distinction of serving in the House. One is the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page). Of the two others, one sits on the Opposition Benches and the other on the Government Benches. The one on this side is my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett), and many people in my constituency still think that he is their Member of Parliament.

My immediate predecessor was Robert Jones, who served with great distinction on environmental matters. In 1986, he produced a Bill to preserve hedgerows; he was Chairman of the Select Committee on the Environment; and he later served as a Minister at the Department of the Environment. I pay tribute to his work in that connection and, as a member of various environmental organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, I hope to be able to continue his work. I particularly want hedgerows to be preserved, even if they contain somewhat fewer than seven separate identifiable species of leaf, which seems to me to be still too little protection. My predecessor served for 14 years, and I believe it would be fair to say that he was rather surprised by the general election result, but that is the way that things go in politics.

My constituency is called Hemel Hempstead, but it includes quite a lot of countryside around the new town that gives it its name. That countryside includes the Ashridge National Trust property, which I believe to be one of the few areas in the south of England that is owned by the National Trust. If one flies over the constituency, one gets a strong sense of greenery and of rural atmosphere.

There are villages in the north: Great Gaddesden and Little Gaddesden—in the British way, the latter is larger than the former—Markyate and Flamstead. In the south of the constituency is Kings Langley, which the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire used to represent and which I now do.

In the east of the constituency is the M1—most people only see the sign and zoom straight by—near Leverstock Green, where there is long-standing evidence of Roman settlements.

The major part of the constituency is Hemel Hempstead, a new town which has been fantastically successful. It is a great tribute to the concept of planning—the concept that each community in the town could have a green area for recreation and that good-quality housing could be provided for people who were being moved away from the devastation that had been caused by the second world war.

The town has running through it one of the longest stretches of canal in my constituency. I should very much like to see a major improvement in transport which might put Hemel Hempstead more prominently on the map.

To come to health matters, within that town is a hospital. The hospital is badly located, as so many hospitals are. Access to the general hospital is difficult; but it would not be difficult if a very short section of road were constructed from the A414, across a field that was long ago nominated for the purpose.

I have heard much from Opposition Members about how we might get additional funds into the health service, but I note that, in today's edition of *The Times*, it is suggested that the windfall tax proposed by the Government might be interpreted much more generously than has been thought.

I have taken the opportunity to suggest to my right hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) that my link road—very short, very cheap—would enable people to develop skills, that the revenue implications in future years would be very insignificant, and that that road might be used as part of that programme. After all, if young people must work, they must work on something, so why not a road to my hospital?

Perhaps in future we shall be more imaginative about the ways in which we raise funds than the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) has

suggested. I wrote to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions about my road, but I have not yet had a reply. I suspect that I shall not have one until after Wednesday 2 July, and in many ways this debate seems extremely premature, because we do not know what the funding arrangements will be.

The other aspect of my local hospitals is closed wards. Fifty-six beds are being pulled out of service. The local NHS trust has a deficit of £2.5 million, and the health authority has a reputed deficit of £10 million. That is the local variation of our inheritance from the Conservatives.

It is often felt that, when the Conservatives were in government, they wanted a system that meant that, if one could afford to go private, one would be cosseted and looked after, but, if one went into the public sector, one would have to make do with a really bad system. The idea was that as many people as possible who had the money would remove their custom from the public to the private sector.

Wards are closed for all sorts of reasons—sometimes for refurbishment. The closure of our wards means that older people are denied access to them, and paediatric provision is being cut. The fact is that wards are usually closed for lack of money.

It is therefore right to ask whether we are ingenious and committed enough to halt the decline in services which is our inheritance from the Opposition. I really hope that ways will be found to provide my general hospital with proper access, so that it can flourish and people can go there secure in the knowledge that they will be treated properly. I hope that they will not find, on turning a blind corner, a place full of dust and decay. They should not be worried about leaving sick relatives there.

We have a long way to go, and I hope that the new Government will approach the funding of the health service with a different and better philosophy, based on co-operation and a great deal more commitment to caring for the health of those who cannot be treated in the private sector.

9 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) on an excellent maiden speech and on having spoken without notes. That is a brave move in the House—almost as brave as asking Ministers for money to be spent in his constituency.

During the short time I have been in the House, the mantra consistently heard from Ministers has been that they are doing whatever they are doing because it was in the manifesto. One might applaud that apparent commitment to the manifesto, were it not for the fact that Ministers have just as consistently turned their backs on the manifesto and broken their election promises. Take, for instance, the Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill, which does not release local government's capital receipts, but merely increases borrowing. The assisted places scheme is being abolished, but no extra money is going into primary schools to reduce class sizes.

Nowhere has this disregard for election commitments and manifesto promises been so callous as in the subject under debate tonight, the national health service. Time and again, before and during the election, the Labour party told us, and the electorate, that, if the Conservatives got back into government, the future of the NHS would be dire; but, if Labour got in, everything would be rosy. Suddenly, it was claimed, all the problems in the NHS would be solved: the electorate could trust the Labour party with the NHS.

Labour's manifesto has already been quoted by several hon. Members, but I make no apology for quoting it again. It is important to remember exactly what it said:

"Labour commits itself anew to the historic principle: that if you are ill or injured there will be a national health service there to help; and access to it will be based on need and need alone—not on your ability to pay".

Yet, a few weeks after the election, the new Secretary of State for Health announces that there will be a review, with no holds barred. Everything is on the agenda:

"We are ruling nothing out".

When asked specifically about charges for seeing a GP, he said:

"You can't pick bits out of it. We are going to look at everything."

Today, the Secretary of State said that he was paying the price for telling the truth. He cannot, however, have it both ways. Either the Labour election manifesto was telling the truth or the Secretary of State is. The statement that access to the NHS will be based on need and need alone, not ability to pay, is incompatible with the Secretary of State's refusal to rule out charges for pensioners' prescriptions, stays in hospital, or visits to the GP. I challenge the Government to tell us which we should believe: the Labour party manifesto or the Secretary of State for health?

In his opening remarks, the Secretary of State gave some insight into the review, but it did not amount to much. He said that the criterion against which the proposed charges would be judged was whether access would be related to ability to pay or whether people might be put off using the national health service. As the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) pointed out, charging people for visiting a GP is entirely inconsistent with that criterion.

It is open to the Minister who will respond to the debate to state clearly that he accepts what is in the manifesto—that access will be based on need, not on ability to pay—and recognises that, as both Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members have pointed out, charging people to visit a GP is contrary to the principles set out in the Labour party manifesto. Will he put our minds at rest tonight by saying that there will be no charges for hospital stays, access to GPs or prescriptions for pensioners?

It is a simple matter. The Labour party manifesto sets out principles for the national health service. Either the Government believe in those principles or they do not. If they believe in them, they should rule out the three possibilities of charges that are raised in the motion, because they are clearly incompatible with the principles set out in the manifesto. I urge them to give a commitment tonight, not only to Opposition Members but to Government Back Benchers and people who are extremely worried by statements that they have heard from the Secretary of State for Health on those issues.

Last Friday, this issue hit the front page of the *Maidenhead Advertiser*, the main paper in my constituency—[HON. MEMBERS: "A very important

[Mrs. Theresa May]

paper."] Absolutely. Labour Members may scoff, but the issue hit the front page because of the significant number of my constituents who will be affected if pensioners are charged for prescriptions.

My constituents are extremely worried, and they want to know why a Labour Government who, in opposition, said that the health service was safe in their hands, and claimed that the Conservative party was a threat to pensioners' access to the health service and to pensioners' way of life, were now considering charging pensioners for prescriptions, and had gone back on statements made during the election and in their manifesto.

I have often heard Labour Members say that the Government will govern in fairness. Is it fair to worry pensioners by refusing to rule out the possibility of those charges? Is it fair to charge pensioners for prescriptions? Is it fair to charge a mother for taking her sick child to a GP?

The answer lies in the hands of those on the Government Front Bench tonight. It is simple. The Government say that they are sticking by their election manifesto. If they believe in the principle set out in the manifesto—that access to the national health service should be based on need, not on ability to pay—the Minister should stand up tonight and rule out the possibility of charges for prescriptions for pensioners, charges for stays in hospital and charges for visits to the GP. That is what people want to hear from the Government. If they believe their own manifesto, that is the commitment that they will give the House tonight.

9.9 pm

Mr. Harold Best (Leeds, North–West): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my first contribution to this honourable House by participating in the debate.

Tradition has it that I should comment about my constituency and my predecessor. I can do both with considerable pleasure. My predecessor was Keith Hampson, whom I got to know fairly well. By common consent of all in the constituency, he was a good constituency Member of Parliament. He worked on behalf of his constituents, and he also played an important role on behalf of his party. He supported the Government most of the time, I understand, while maintaining that critical faculty which is essential for any self-respecting, active politician.

As an opponent in the recent general election, Keith Hampson's behaviour was both warm and proper. I am truly grateful for the way in which he behaved, and I have fond memories of him. In short, he was a good man, and, I am pleased to say, remains a good man. I look forward to seeing him again, but not in this place.

My constituency, Leeds, North-West, is a wonderful mixture of places and people. It runs from an inner-city area known locally as Hyde Park, out to the beautiful lower Wharfedale. In the lower part of lower Wharfedale, it encompasses the lovely little town of Otley, which is picturesque but extremely hard-working. The constituency is a fine mixture of industrial and urban life, and rural idyll.

The constituency manages to mix high technology in the electrical engineering industry—the production of precision electrical switchgear—with a successful farming industry. Sadly, there is also considerable unemployment in the inner-city part, and other associated problems.

We have in the constituency the greater part of two large universities. Living in a particular area are 35,000 students, who have not been without significant influence on the electoral process. Given their recent voting pattern, I hope that that remains so. I am one of the few candidates who moved from third place in the constituency to first place.

We also have two large hospitals in the constituency. Wharfedale general hospital is an extremely successful general hospital. It provides exactly the kind of services needed from a general hospital and, in addition to serving the health needs of the people of Wharfedale, it provides 600 jobs, which is not insignificant in a rural area.

Cookridge hospital specialises in radiotherapy treatment. It helps thousands of people from all over the area, as far and wide as Newcastle and Sheffield. It is seen largely as a regional hospital treating cancer patients.

In recent years, those fine hospitals have been under a cloud of uncertainty and anxiety about their future. We have tried to resolve the matter within the constituency. People need to know that hospital services will be available when they need them. It is a question not just of the services being freely available, but of their being available when they are needed.

There are serious doubts about the continued operation of Wharfedale hospital. A review has been conducted, and we have tried to obtain the results. During the review process, the representatives of various management levels attended public meetings, and assured all concerned that they would soon know about the proposals.

Although we have addressed the appropriate questions to the appropriate levels, we are none the wiser. Most people believe that the problem lies with the last few years of Conservative government. When we have received replies from management, I have been reminded of the American President Calvin Coolidge in the early part of the century, of whom it was said:

"He didn't say much but, when he did, he didn't say much."

That is the kind of response that we have received from Tory Ministers and the layers of hospital management with which we have had to deal.

It is not that local people have not made an effort: town and district councillors have campaigned on behalf of the hospital, and petitions have been organised. However, the deafening silence continues. Otley town council enlisted the assistance of a local employer, and located a large plot of land. The council and that employer may be able to find the funding necessary to develop a private finance initiative project. However, we have received no response from Government—until now.

It seems that the future of Wharfedale was taken seriously by everyone except the Tory Government and the hospital administration. I am pleased to see that that situation has changed. I have written to my right hon. Friend about the issue, and I have already received a reply. We are looking forward to the conclusion of further developments that will bring light and hope to my area. We are certain that the review's findings will be positive.

The Cookridge hospital is also under threat, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend will hear about that in the near future. We look forward to the implementation of Labour's manifesto promises. There must be an end to waiting lists for cancer surgery and an improvement in the diagnostic systems available to women suffering from

breast cancer. The people of Leeds, North-West, whom I am pleased to represent, voted for many things in the election: not least for a one-class—a first-class—health service that is available to all people in their time of need. My right hon. Friend has reiterated those promises tonight, and I look forward to seeing them delivered in my area.

9.18 pm

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds, North–West (Mr. Best) on his eloquent maiden speech and thank him for his kind words about his predecessor, Keith Hampson. The hon. Gentleman is truly privileged to represent a constituency in God's county.

I congratulate other hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches tonight. The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) referred to Robert James. I agreed with the hon. Gentleman about hedgerows and driving up the M1. However, when he spoke of the Conservative Government's treatment of a hospital in his constituency, my foot remained on the accelerator and I continued along the M1.

I should also mention the exceedingly eloquent contribution of the hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate). It must be satisfying to be able to contribute to a debate on a subject in which one has professional knowledge and for which one has trained. Alas, for my part, I decided it was politic not to wait for a debate on Mesopotamian architecture before I pitched in with my contribution. If the hon. Gentleman's skills as a doctor match his skills as an orator, he must have a healthy bunch of constituents.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) rightly said that it was ironic that the Opposition are using the first opportunity presented to them to attack the Government on the words that they are using about the national health service.

The Secretary of State made an interesting and informative speech: alas, that was not this evening and not in the Chamber. The right hon. Gentleman has, of course, brought the debate upon himself by the words that he has uttered recently. It is ironic that only a few weeks ago the electorate faced the scam of a manifesto that, in effect, carried the banner, "We shall save the NHS". Appalling scaremongering about the NHS went with that. With indecent haste, the "Save the NHS" banner has become "Let's save the NHS a lot of money" by introducing charges never contemplated by the Conservative Government.

The Secretary of State promises one of the now legendary Government reviews. We are promised that it will be a no-holds-barred review. The right hon. Gentleman says, "We are counting nothing in and nothing out." That hokey-cokey approach to election pledges is symptomatic of the steamroller approach that is characteristic of the Government's early days.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford–on–Avon (Mr. Maples), speaking from the Opposition Front Bench, repeatedly invited the Secretary of State to deny that the Government have any intention of introducing the charges to which I have referred and to say that they are counting the fundamental tenets of the NHS out of their review. Those tenets include free-at-the-point-of-access care and other fundamental beliefs on which Conservatives have run the NHS for most of the century.

The Secretary of State refused to rule out the possibility that the Government are considering introducing charges for hotel accommodation. The right hon. Gentleman refused also to rule out the introduction of charges for interviews with general practitioners. He refused again, most markedly for my constituency, which has the highest proportion of pensioners in the country, to rule out the prospect of charging pensioners for prescriptions.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Loughton: I shall continue. There is not long before the Front Bench spokesmen respond to the debate.

A few years back, the Secretary of State, as he now is, said:

> "The Tories know that the people of this country fear for the future of the NHS. That is why they have kept under wraps the far right ideas of charges for visiting the doctor or for staying in hospital."

Far right—that is scary stuff. The Labour party has come a long way.

I take up the issue of charges for interviews with GPs. In West Sussex generally we have a fine reputation for GP fundholders. Over two thirds of GP practices in the county are fundholding practices. I spent much time with skilled fundholders. I sat in surgeries and watched pensioners come in and go out.

In one surgery, which I have visited many times, an elderly patient saw the doctor about some growths on his wrist. It is a common ailment for elderly people. The doctor asked him, "Can you come back tomorrow? I shall do it then." The patient, who lived just up the road, was able to return 24 hours later and have the growths removed under local anaesthetic by his own GP, one of more than 80 per cent. of GPs who are qualified to perform minor surgery. That cost a fraction of what it would have cost to send him to the nearby Worthing hospital, where he would have been put on a waiting list and have had to wait months for that treatment. Will such treatment be liable for charges? Is there any incentive for that person and many like him to go to such a local community hospital GP fundholder practice to be cured of minor ailments? I contend that there is no incentive.

West Sussex is already penalised by not having a fair share of the NHS funding cake, especially in the Worthing district. The prospect of pensioners having to pay for prescriptions is already causing untold worry to many of my constituents. The issue has appeared on the front pages of my local press, as it did in the local newspaper of my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May). Under the previous Government, more than 82 per cent. of prescriptions were free, and the number of NHS treatments that registered a charge declined, so that they accounted for less than 2 per cent. of overall NHS funding. That is a worthy record of declining charges, but now, unless the Government deny it, it will be severely reversed.

Only two countries in the European Union charge pensioners for prescriptions. We are one of the few European Union countries that does not charge for visits to GPs. Are we to be subjected to a harmonisation of GP and prescription charges to show ourselves as good Europeans?

[Mr. Loughton]

We have been promised—and are likely to see in the Budget next week—the abolition of tax breaks for pensioners who have taken out private health care insurance. That is yet another example of false economy. Those people who, as a result, will not be able to pay for private health care will be added to NHS waiting lists, just as those who are unable to go on the assisted places scheme will add to the supposed overcrowding in many classrooms.

It is clear that we are starting to see the Government's hidden agenda. They want to claw back money from the elderly and the vulnerable to make up for the shortcomings of their commitments. They want to make up for the enormous bill that the minimum wage will generate when it is introduced into the NHS: it will probably amount to more than £500 million. They want to make up for adding pensioners to waiting lists by scrapping the tax relief on their private health care policies, which will have a domino effect.

They want to make up for the enormous costs of abolishing GP fundholders and the massive disincentive to existing GP fundholders: they will no longer be responsible for their budgets, so why should they bother to keep within them? They want to make up for the costs of dismantling trusts and returning to the nanny state approach, so that the success of locally run, locally purchasing and locally planning hospital trusts will be crushed under the steamroller of centralised bureaucratic placemen. None of those things will add one iota to patient care and to the good of patients.

It is shameful that we have had to have this debate. It is more shameful that Ministers have treated with contempt this opportunity to allay the fears of my constituents, especially the sick and the elderly.

9.28 pm

Mr. David Lock (Wyre Forest): I am grateful for the chance to make my maiden speech on the important issue of health. Bearing in mind the time, I shall be shorter than I might otherwise have been, but I hope that brevity will assist in the quality of the speech.

It is a privilege to be sent to the House to represent the people of Wyre Forest. The constituency covers north-west Worcestershire, including the towns of Kidderminster, Stourport, Bewdley and many surrounding villages. Bewdley is a delightful mediaeval town nestling in the Severn with a well-deserved reputation as a tourist venue. It has an excellent festival. Kidderminster and Stourport have long traditions in the carpet industry. The factories may not be as numerous as in earlier years, but people in Kidderminster know the difference between a woven and a tufted carpet like no one else in Britain.

The industry has suffered in recent years, but we have some fine companies that are investing in a confident future. They include Brintons—a predecessor of mine in the constituency, Sir Talton Brinton, was the second member of the Brinton family to represent Kidderminster—and Tomkinsons and Victoria, which are investing in the future to provide secure jobs for the highly skilled work force in the area.

I thank and pay tribute to my predecessor, Anthony Coombs, who held the seat for 10 years. He was a diligent constituency Member: he became someone on whom his constituents could count, and he was always most courteous in his dealings with me. His concern for his constituents has risen above his disappointment at losing his seat. He was gracious at the count, and has been very co-operative in handing over constituency case files. I am grateful for his assistance in breaking me in to this most unusual but privileged of jobs.

This debate, however, is about the NHS. In Worcestershire, we have a health authority that is in deficit—one of 59 such authorities. The trust that runs Wyre Forest's only hospital, Kidderminster general, is carefully managed; but it is in deficit, and the fact that it is an agreed deficit, anticipated in the budget, does not remove that deficit. For years the trust has been spending in the hope of rises in future years, but its hopes were dashed each time by the previous Government. A review is in progress at the moment, but I am confident that it will uphold the position of smaller hospitals such as Kidderminster. It is an impressive hospital with an excellent accident and emergency department, and I am sure that the strong arguments in support of it will be maintained.

In the short time available to me, let me say that we shall need—among other things—a serious national debate on priorities for the health service. For too long, doctors have been asked to make all the choices, and service provision is patchy across the country. The market beloved of Adam Smith and the Conservative party is an amoral device, and many issues in health care require moral decisions.

I wish to raise four specific matters. First, what will be the weighting between new drugs and established treatments? The former may offer the possibility of better results for the few, while the latter may benefit larger numbers at lower cost. What of social factors, such as bad housing—and smoking, which kills 1,600 a year in my constituency and adds half a million pounds to the costs at Kidderminster general hospital? The better a person's circumstances, the more treatment may help that person from an objective point of view; but it cannot be right to refuse treatment to the poor while allowing it to those in better circumstances.

What of the elderly? The fact that so many people are living longer is a tribute to the success of medicine, but is there to be a cut-off date? What of specialist treatments, which are vital to the few but ignored by the many? As a parent, I know the joys of children, but what level of funding should we give fertility treatment?

Those are difficult issues. We have a national health service now, but there is a lottery of care across the country. In each of the examples that I have given, different policies are pursued by different health authorities in different parts of the country. We need a national debate on priorities in health care—a debate way outside the confines of the narrow motion that we are discussing—and I am confident that the new Government are prepared to embrace such a debate. We also need a debate that goes beyond the medical profession and the Government, so that the people can have a say in decisions about the people's choices for the people's NHS.

This debate on charges is a tiny part of a much larger debate. I have every confidence that Ministers have the ability, the wisdom and the courage to face those difficult issues in the months and years ahead.

9.34 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock) on his splendid maiden speech. He will be a great asset to the Opposition Whips because he did exactly what they told him to do by cutting his speech to leave time for the winding-up speeches. I thank him for that.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford–on–Avon (Mr. Maples) on his comeback speech. He made a telling contribution; during his absence from the House he lost nothing of his incisive ability to get to the heart of the matter. He exposed the Secretary of State for what he is—the purveyor of large amounts of smoke, a screen and waffle. He did not respond to any of the Opposition's substantive points.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) on his speech and thank him for his kind words about his predecessor, Bob Dunn. Mr. Dunn will be grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments and I am pleased to know that we have another doctor in the House.

In a telling contribution, the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) showed that he will be a real handful for the Labour Whips because within seconds of rising he asked for money. That is dangerous, and not only the Minister without Portfolio but the Chancellor of the Exchequer will have a word with him.

The hon. Member for Leeds, North–West (Mr. Best) made kind comments about Keith Hampson and I was delighted to hear what he said about Leeds. I know the city well and he spoke of it with passion and conviction. The hon. Member for Wyre Forest mentioned Anthony Coombs and it would be remiss of me not to thank him for those kind words. He also made some interesting comments about challenges for the national health service.

There were some useful and thoughtful Opposition speeches. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) spoke from his great experience and properly drew the House's attention to the challenges that will face the NHS in the 21st century. He was right to speak about the long term. The theme of the debate was to try to prise from the Government their short-term thinking, never mind their long-term thinking, and that proved extremely difficult. The Secretary of State, a senior Minister, failed lamentably to rise to the challenge of answering straightforward questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford–on–Avon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) delivered another of her well-crafted and perceptive speeches in which she listed some of the Government's pledge formulations. I shall add to her list the third formulation of the amendment. Already the ground continues to shift and I shall speak later about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) put his finger on the important issue of charging and, in a way, he associated himself with the speech by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) because they both got to the heart of the matter. If the Government's endless wish list of possibilities is to be anything more than that, and if they hope to satisfy the ever-louder cries of their Back Benchers, they will have to find more money. The platitudinous approach to health care policy will not do.

In his reply to allegations about charging, the Secretary of State said that the Government were going back to the basics of the health service. It is interesting to do that. I commend to the Secretary of State, who is a good socialist, Aneurin Bevan's biography. When Gaitskell got into the Treasury he had the then Secretary of State for Health for breakfast, lunch and tea. It was a typical Treasury pressure job. The Secretary of State was told, "You are spending too much. Where is more money to come from?" We know what happened. Bevan eventually capitulated and charges came in.

That was the response then, and if the Government intend to go back to basics in the health service, we are entitled to conclude that that is exactly what they will do now. Indeed, the Secretary of State had better be warned that, even if he is bold enough to go down the route of charges under pressure from the Treasury—and we believe that he is, as he has offered no evidence to the contrary this evening—he will have his just desserts. He has said nothing to convince us that money raised through charges would do other than go straight into the Treasury's coffers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford–on–Avon put his finger on the truth when he pointed out that Mr. Nicholas Timmins, an experienced and knowledgeable journalist, had flushed out the Government's objectives on charges. His article makes it absolutely clear that the Department of Health is examining hotel costs and general practitioner visits. Those are not new; they were there in 1947 and in 1948. It has just taken the Labour party a little time to return to its original agenda of the founding fathers of the NHS.

Until the Secretary of State or the Minister of State has the courage to rise at the Dispatch Box and tell the House straightforwardly what their plans are, we have every justification for believing that charges will be introduced. Indeed, more justification was presented to us in the Secretary of State's statement to the House. He told us that in London we were going to have

"top-quality primary care . . . top-quality continuing care"

and

"top-quality mental health services".

What does he mean by all this top-quality business? Does he mean the best in the world or a service that is better than what we have at present? If he does mean that, and bearing in mind the fact that he is wedded to our spending proposals, by definition he will require some more money. That is why he is thinking of charges. He knows full well that that is the only route out of the dilemma and the traps that he has set himself through his own rhetoric.

The Secretary of State said:

"All that is in line with the Government's vision of a range of top-quality services for all Londoners."—[*Official Report*, 20 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 544.]

So that we might get to the truth of the matter, will the Minister of State assure the House tonight that he will define numerically what the Secretary of State means by "top-quality"? Will he actually let us know what that means and how much these things will cost?

Mr. Dobson: The Tories do not know what it means.

Mr. Jack: The Secretary of State is a statistical ignoramus because he is unable to understand what it means to define, in money terms, the sort of meaningless rhetoric that he puts forward.

[Mr. Jack]

Perhaps I should refresh the Secretary of State's memory of what he said earlier today. He went to the seaside for an away-day and made a speech on health, in which he went even further. Not content now just with London, he is promising us top-quality primary scare—*[Interruption.]* [HON. MEMBERS: "A scare."] My hon. Friends have flushed out Ministers, who talk about top-quality continuing care and top-quality mental health.

In his speech in Brighton, the Secretary of State ruled out any closures of any local hospitals—*[Interruption.]* Well, that is what he said in Brighton today. Do not shake your head like that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The occupant of the Chair does not have responsibility for these matters.

Mr. Jack: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am grateful to you for your kind words of advice.

In his speech, the Secretary of State made it extremely clear that he was welding himself effectively to an unchanged health service. That, in its own way, will have costs.

The Secretary of State tells us that he wants to have an excellent information service. The Government must come clean and tell us what all this means in terms of something that is quantifiable. We know that such promises will cost a lot of money and we have every justification in asking the Government for solid answers on how much this wish list will cost. Will the Minister of State give me an assurance tonight, first, that he will publish, in pursuit of his obligations to open government, the questions that will be the subject of this fundamental expenditure review? So that we may show the validity of our charge that the Government wish to introduce charges to raise revenue to fulfil their wish list, will the Secretary of State publish the questions that he is going to pose as part of the review that he mentioned in his press release?

We are entitled to believe that the Government of the day will require more money for this impressive list of ideas. In *Scotland on Sunday*, Mr. John Lloyd put forward this view:

"We can be reasonably sure of one thing. The review will require more payment by the individual for his or her treatment in some way at some time soon. It will further breach the principle of a service free at the point of use."

The Government's amendment talks about access to the NHS based on need. "Access" is an interesting word. Access refers to the way in. No Labour Member has talked about what happens on the way out. On the way out is where one pays the bills—the new bills from the Labour Government.

The Minister of State puts his head in his hands, but that is just a simple way of trying to hide the fact that we have flushed out the truth of this matter. *[Interruption.]* The Minister is now barracking—another standard technique to avoid telling the truth.

I remind the Minister that the NHS chief executive, Mr. Alan Langlands, told us that

"we must look at the case for further investment in the NHS with the right combination of compassion and hard-headedness."

"Hard-headedness" is a code word for charges. That is clear.

The Government's amendment criticises the previous Government. I expect that the Minister of State, in an effort to rebut the accusation with regard to charges, will once again go through the same litany as the Secretary of State on the subject of NHS bureaucracy.

I want the Minister to assure me that he will look at the staff salary costs for the NHS in 1992–93 at the time of the previous election. He will see that that came to 6.8 per cent. of the spending on the NHS. I want him to compare those figures, as I did this afternoon in the Library, with the figures for 1997–98, taking into account the £350 million reduction in staff costs occasioned by the terms of the 1992 legislation. The effect of that legislation was to reduce the bureaucracy costs of the NHS from 6.8 per cent. in 1992–93 to 6.5 per cent. in 1997–98.

That shows that Conservative policies contributed more money to front-line patient care, creating a health service of which we can be proud and which delivers more patient care than ever before, with a greater percentage of GDP than ever before. They delivered a health service that is not rotten with bureaucracy, because we cut out the problem and made more money available.

If we have done all that, we are entitled to return to the central issue of charges. If the Government are to deliver their incredibly long wish list, they will need more money. They have to tell us the funding deficit in the health service so that we can judge their actions in the future and know exactly where they will get the money. We believe, because they have not said otherwise, that it will come from charges.

9.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I welcome the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) to his new responsibility as shadow Health Minister. I enjoyed working opposite him when he was in the Treasury and I look forward to working with him now. I urge him to be slightly cautious about bandying statistics around on bureaucracy in the NHS. I remind him that the Conservative party is not the enemy of red tape in the NHS but the friend of bureaucracy in the NHS. The Conservatives managed to spend an extra £900 million in extra administrative salaries alone in the first six years of this decade. Far from cutting red tape in the NHS, they increased it.

We have had a fairly a wide-ranging debate. The right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) talked about the cost of care for the elderly and the problems caused to the NHS by a growing elderly population. There are some dangers in being a prophet of doom, because the NHS has coped admirably with growing numbers of elderly people in every year since it was created in 1948. Even the previous Administration, in the evidence that they gave to the Select Committee on Health in the last Session, managed to recognise that, while the number of elderly people will continue to grow, we are past the worst.

Like many Tory Members, the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) quoted the Labour party's manifesto from the last general election. I am pleased that she did so. She asked me for an undertaking that we would honour our pledges in that manifesto, and I give her that undertaking unequivocally. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) talked,

unwisely in my view, about prescription charges for pensioners. I caution him about lecturing us about increasing charges for pensioners when it was the Conservative Government who introduced value added tax on fuel, which so penalised pensioners.

As always, the Liberal spokesman, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), was the font of much advice, even urging me to beg the Chancellor of the Exchequer for more cash. I am grateful to him for one thing at least—his support for a review of the anomalies in prescription charges and of NHS spending. However, I remind him that we shall keep not only our manifesto pledges on the health service but our pledges and promises on other issues, not least taxation.

I deal now with the maiden speeches made by my hon. Friends. My hon. Friends the Members for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) and for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock) talked about the difficult problems they face in their areas because of the legacy that the NHS inherited. They talked in particular about the burden of debt facing health authorities and trusts. It is a difficult legacy, one that we shall have to tackle in the coming months, but they will be aware, as much I am, that there are no easy solutions or quick fixes to the problem.

From his own experience as a GP, my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) rightly talked about the anomalies in the current exemption regime for prescription charges. I am grateful for his support for the review that we shall be undertaking.

Finally, in an impressive maiden speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-West (Mr. Best), used a very important phrase about the sort of national health service we want. He said that we want a one-class NHS—a first-class NHS.

I deal briefly with the two other maiden speeches we have heard this evening, which were made by Opposition Front Benchers. I am sorry for the Opposition health team's having to make their debut on the NHS because they have been forced to defend the indefensible—the Tories' record on health and their running down of the NHS. The Tories leave a quite appalling legacy—*[Interruption.]* I know that Opposition Members do not want to listen because they do not want to face the truth about record waiting lists, record cuts in capital expenditure and record debt in the NHS.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey asked us what we were going to do about the private finance initiative. We shall do one very simple thing—we will make it work and get hospitals built. It will take more than eight weeks for the new Government to put right the Tory record of 18 years, so we will not take any lectures from Opposition Members about our handling of the NHS.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Of course the Government have to deal with some matters quickly, but if the Minister thinks that the PFI is the solution that will get more money from the private sector to the NHS, he is badly mistaken. A far more fundamental review is needed; the PFI is not the way forward.

Mr. Milburn: I have two comments in reply to that. There is a queue of 43 major acute hospital projects for which communities up and down the country have been waiting for funding not just from the private finance initiative, but, for dozens of years in many cases, from public sector capital. We are determined to give some of those communities the hospitals that they need. Of course we shall consider reviewing the private finance initiative in the longer term to bring in a modernised form of public-private partnership to the national health service.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I have listened very carefully to the Minister. He has suggested that the Government would be able to have many more hospitals built through the private finance initiative. We are having a reasonable debate. How many hospitals does he expect to get built under the PFI?

Mr. Milburn: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that it will be more than his Government got built.

The Tories lost the general election on 1 May for one simple reason—they had lost the trust of the British people. Labour won because we won the trust of the British people. On no issue is that more true than on the national health service. After all, the NHS was created by a Labour Government. I remind Conservative Members that that was done in the teeth of Conservative opposition.

Labour also warned that the introduction of the internal market would undermine the principles of the NHS and would cause a public outcry. No wonder the best advice that the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) could give in his famous memorandum to colleagues was to aim for "zero media coverage" about the national health service.

Is that any surprise when hospital was set against hospital, doctor against doctor and patient against patient? The NHS has been strangled in red tape, with enough invoices from general practitioners alone to stretch from London to Paris and back. In the two-tier health service, access to care depends on the lottery of patients' post codes and their GP practices. More patients have been forced to go private because the NHS was not there when they needed it. We have had a Secretary of State for Health who was reported as being prepared to support a private GP service. The Tory Administration saw nothing wrong in privatising clinical services at Stonehaven hospital.

In a debate about NHS charges, let us also remind ourselves who slapped charges on dental checks and eye tests. It was not the Labour party or a Labour Government, but the Conservatives. The Tory Government also increased prescription charges by almost 1,000 per cent. during their period in office. Charges rose every year from 1979. For the Conservatives to accuse us of undermining the national health service is, to put it at its politest, hypocrisy of the highest order.

Mr. Maples *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: Before the hon. Gentleman jumps up and down any more, trying to intervene on me in the few moments that I have left to speak, I remind him that a bit of humility would not come amiss from the Conservatives. The public know that his charges are hypocrisy, as do staff in the national health service.

We will keep our manifesto promises. Indeed, we are already keeping them. We promised to cut NHS bureaucracy, and we are—by £100 million this year alone. We promised to invest in front-line patient services, and

[Mr. Milburn]

we are doing so. We promised to scrap the absurd internal market in the NHS, and we are doing so. We promised to bring back fairness in treatment and funding, and we are doing so. Above all, we promised that access to the NHS would be based on need and not on ability to pay. We stand by that commitment to the historical principle of the national health service. I can tell Opposition Members that we will do nothing to betray that trust.

We promised something else in our manifesto—a comprehensive spending review. That review will be framed in the context of our manifesto. We will honour the pledges that we gave to the people of Britain—

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North–East Hampshire) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 148, Noes 328.

Division No. 40] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Febricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(N Essex)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merchant, Piers
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thompson, William
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. John Whittingdale.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham *(Nottingham N)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne *(Aberd'n S)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Blizzard, Robert
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dean, Ms Janet

Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Ms Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Ms Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Ms Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Ms Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Miss Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Livingstone, Ken
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Ms Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Ms Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Dr Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. David Clelland.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 309, Noes 148.

Division No. 41] **[10.15 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham *(Nottingham N)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne *(Aberd'n S)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold

Betts, Clive
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Blizzard, Robert
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond *(Kilmarnock)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dean, Ms Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Ms Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Ms Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian *(Tamworth)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Ms Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Ms Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Mrs Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Miss Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry (Worsley)
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Ms Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Ms Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Mrs Gisela *(Edgbaston)*
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Dr Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. David Clelland.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(N Essex)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merchant, Piers
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thompson, William
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. John Whittingdale.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the commitment of Her Majesty's Government to the historic principle of the National Health Service that if someone is ill or injured there will be a national health service to help, with access to it based on need, not on ability to pay or on who their general practitioner happens to be or on where they live; notes the steps which are being taken to end the internal market, which is unfair both to patients and staff and which has resulted in massive sums being consumed by bureaucracy; welcomes the shift of funds into patient care, including cancer treatment, instead of paperwork; and looks forward to further changes which will ensure that once again the National Health Service provides the best health services for all and is ready to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

STANDARDS AND PRIVILEGES

Ordered,

That Mr. Peter Bottomley, Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours, Mr. Quentin Davies, Mr. Michael Foster (Hastings and Rye), Mr. Charles Kennedy, Mr. Tom Levitt, Mr. Terry Lewis, Ms Shona McIsaac, Mr. Robert Sheldon, Miss Ann Widdecombe and Mr. Alan Williams be members of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.—*[Ms Bridget Prentice.]*

PETITION

Vivisection

10.28 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I have great pleasure in presenting to the House a petition put together by the National Anti-Vivisection Society. It is long overdue.

The petition calls for a substantial investigation into how the current legislation operates and reads:

Therefore your petitioners pray that your humble House will urge the Government to

1. Make available technical details (not names or locations) of all applicants for project licences under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, and allow individuals and organisations to oppose such licences on scientific and ethical grounds, and offer suggestions for non-animal procedures.

2. Provide details of all breaches of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, and the action taken, in the format of a short, detailed and easily accessible public report. If law-breakers are not prosecuted, reasons should be given. If the Government's codes of practice are breached, full details should be published, together with the details of action taken.

That petition was signed by 105,000 citizens of the United Kingdom, led by Miss Fiona Deal of London.

To lie upon the Table.

Gulf War Syndrome

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

10.29 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): It might be asked why we need to revisit the subject of Gulf war syndrome, given that it is more than six years since the end of the Persian Gulf war, and the Ministry of Defence is funding two epidemiological studies into the health of Gulf war veterans and their families.

The first of the studies will aim to establish whether there are unusual patterns of ill health among the veterans, and the second will examine whether they are experiencing adverse reproductive outcomes. A third study, with the support of the United States Department of Defence, will carry out a detailed epidemiological study into the patterns of illness. The studies will not necessarily identify causes and will take some three years to complete—they should be completed by 2000.

A novel investigation, promoted and planned by the Government, will be funded; it will examine the health effects of having been subjected to multiple vaccinations and chemical medications to negate the effects of nerve gases, in recognition of the possibility of synergistic interactive effects between the two onslaughts.

The reason for revisiting the problem is that we are just beginning to see the emergence of scientific research that addresses the long-term health effects on the service men and women who took part in that war. Although the information applies to studies in the United States, it is of considerable interest.

Clearly, the troops were exposed to several potentially serious physical and psychological stresses. Those included multiple immunisations, pyridostigmine prophylaxis, pollution from oil fires and the liberal use of pesticides, such as organophosphates and insect repellents. The list continues to grow.

As the war occurred in inhospitable surroundings and there was the recurring threat of exposure to chemical and microbiological weapons—possibly sarin, which was used in the Tokyo underground, and mustard gas—adverse effects on health would be unsurprising.

Overriding all the research, however, is the serious complication of defining Gulf war syndrome. A syndrome is generally defined as a group of symptoms that occur together and characterise a particular disease.

Many syndromes are known to medical science and are relatively easy to define. The recorded symptoms in the case of the veterans, however, have been so wide ranging, from depression to cognitive dysfunction, that researchers are tempted to break them down into three or four separate syndromes affecting perhaps three or four separate organ systems.

One of the scientists stated:

"the syndromes are due to subtle brain, spinal cord and nerve damage, but not stress."

That conclusion is disputed by others. At present, as there is no clear specifically associated illness—a cancer, for example—we cannot say whether Gulf war syndrome is one syndrome.

It is clear, however, that so far in the new studies, which are the first to study human populations, there is strong evidence of a health problem associated with service in the Gulf. Given memory recall and poor records, it is difficult to associate any particular exposure or exposures with a defined symptom.

A body of evidence suggests that each substance in itself could cause a range of problems. Organophosphate pesticides are known to have chronic neurological effects on agricultural workers, and research into longer-term low-level exposures is suggestive, but not as consistent as studies on chronically poisoned subjects. There is some evidence, for example, of sub-clinical effects on the central and peripheral nervous systems of sheep dippers.

A worrying element in the saga appeared in today's newspapers, which reported that tents from the Gulf war, which were sprayed with organophosphates, were sold to scout troops in this country. I should be grateful for clarification from the Minister on the matter, and I hope that he can go some way towards laying to rest the concerns about that use of organophosphates.

A really interesting find, which may point to a final resolution of the problem, is that pyridostigmine can cross the blood-brain barrier and affect central nervous system function under stress conditions. It is clear that the toxicological, biochemical and congenital effects of these compounds and vaccinations, singly or together, were poorly understood before the troops from the United States and from this country were subjected to them.

Although, as a scientist, I could get embroiled for hours in deliberations on and details of the biological and medical effects, we must admit that unravelling the roles of the various factors is a complex task. It may be more important to look at the individuals who are ill—as many become ill—and decide what to do. After all, we may reach the same end effect of any particular health condition via various routes, each of which is initiated and maintained by different factors.

I thought about that matter today in the context of the controversy over the increase in cancers that people predict some groups will suffer. I thought also about the dramatic increase in prostate cancer in East Anglia and how prostate cancer became a popular study in the United States when Stormin' Norman contracted it. The Gulf war had been shown on television, and there was suddenly a great interest in that type of study. I could not help but correlate his problem with that of the Gulf veterans. I do not mean to imply that the general's prostate tumours resulted from his participation in the Gulf war, but we must know what factors are causing the increase in prostate tumours.

There is nothing sacrosanct about three years' research—studies may take a lot longer. We may find that the selection of projects is rather biased and that, for example, clinical studies on the immune response of the veterans who were exposed to multiple vaccinations and pyridostigmine are the source of relevant data. For example, it is relevant to ask: do multiple vaccinations associate with immunological abnormalities and do they produce a satisfactory antibody response—which is a marker of immunity? Developing correlations of Gulf war illness with such effects seems as appropriate a research subject as those being researched.

All that is fine. However, as one of the British researchers has said:

"all the new studies will not give us all the answers but will at least tell us where we should be going."

He continues:

"It is a pity they were not able to start sooner".

The studies at this stage are hypothesis generating and not hypothesis testing. We should also take account of a further complication, as US research defines health differences between reservists and Regulars. Britain made far less use of reservists.

Where does that leave the situation? The medical assessment programme continues to give individual attention to the vital health problems associated with Gulf war service and, although it has been criticised, it has at least blazed a trail for future surveillance strategy.

Some emerging problems in legal compensation merit our immediate attention. Hon. Members will know that there are two possible sources of help for armed forces personnel who believe that they are ill as a result of service in the Gulf war: a war pension from the Department of Social Security or a pension from the armed forces pension scheme. In practice, most of the claims from Gulf war veterans who argue that they are suffering from the syndrome relate to the DSS. Although it is true that, by May 1997, 140 of 279 claims from service men who linked their illness to service in the Gulf had been cleared—resulting in 124 awards in the service men's favour—another problem is fast approaching.

Seven years after the end of service is the cut-off point at which the burden of proof shifts to the claimant—the service man or woman. I acknowledge that, where there is reasonable doubt, the service man or woman will get the benefit of that doubt. However, as the end of the seven years approaches fast for many service men and women, the Secretary of State must show beyond reasonable doubt that the injury was not attributable to, or aggravated by, service.

There will be no problem if the research establishes a link between service in the Gulf and the illnesses of which veterans complain. However, if it concludes that there is no link or it is neutral on the subject, difficulties will clearly arise. In March 1997, the Defence Select Committee concluded:

"It's a matter of deep regret that so many ill Gulf veterans were left to seek compensation through potentially protracted court proceedings. We are not convinced that it is always right for veterans to have to prove negligence in respect of compensation for injuries sustained on official duty. There are other mechanisms such as no fault compensation which may be appropriate in certain circumstances."

I believe that 1,228 notices of intention to claim for legal compensation under common law for causation and negligence have been filed by veterans. The Select Committee continued:

"For those Gulf War veterans who can establish that they were exposed to OPs"—

organophosphates, pesticides—

"and that there is no other explanation for current illness we believe that there is a strong case for ex-gratia payment. We recommend that the Government makes such a payment."

In the light of the uncertainties, the conclusions of the research, the time span allowed—three years—the obvious illness of Gulf war veterans and the seven year cut-off point for claims soon approaching, I wonder whether my hon. Friend the Minister is prepared to re-examine the question of payments, take legal opinion if necessary, examine previous similar problems that have been handled by the Government, and report back.

I believe that research must continue for however long it takes. It should be expanded to embrace other questions. Research should ensure that the problems to which I have drawn attention never happen again, and should lead to a more careful scientific and medical assessment of many of the compounds that pervade our lives.

10.40 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Dr. John Reid): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) on his good fortune so early in his career in securing an Adjournment debate on such an important subject. There are few Members of this place who are qualified to speak with the authority that he does on this subject.

I congratulate also the two occupants of the Opposition Front Bench on their new positions. I refer to the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, late of transport and Ealing, Acton, who has transferred from bikes to tanks—the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young)—and his hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), who is now, as I understand it, the shadow Armed Forces Minister. I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his post. It is unusual to have two such eminent members of the Opposition in their places so late at night. I can think only that they have taken the advice of the Glasgow police and decided to travel in twos on dangerous occasions.

We are dealing with an extremely important and grave matter for those who are affected by it. The Government share my hon. Friend's concern for veterans of the Gulf war who have, since their return from service in that conflict, fallen ill. We recognise that we owe them a debt of honour. Those men and women have served their country and have the right to expect us to discharge our duty as expeditiously and attentively as possible. I can assure them that the Government will be tireless in their efforts to understand the reasons for veterans' ill health.

My hon. Friend will be aware that last month, within a week of coming into the position that I now hold, I announced a package of new measures designed to address veterans' concerns. Some of those measures have been implemented. Others will take a little longer, but veterans can be confident that the Government will be a Government of action, not of words.

As a signal of the Government's determination to deal openly and honestly with Gulf veterans, I promised—I have already carried out the promise—to meet veterans' representatives, to listen to what they had to say and to ascertain how that should inform our actions. It is vital that veterans should have the opportunity to put their concerns to us directly, and it was not without a little pride that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I were able to invite them for the first time through the portals of the Ministry of Defence—their Ministry of Defence, not my or the Government's Ministry. I hope that more meetings will take place in future.

[Dr. John Reid]

In dealing with the concerns of veterans, I try to approach them by making it plain from the start that there are some things—three in particular—that I cannot do. I want to make it plain to the House also that I cannot do them. It is not in my gift to do them.

First, I cannot tell veterans exactly what is wrong with them. Secondly, I cannot tell them the cause or causes of their illness. Thirdly, because I cannot do the first and the second, I cannot tell them whether anyone is to blame. Those are matters that ultimately will be adjudicated upon only by those who have either the legal or medical experience to do so.

However, although we may not know the exact nature of the link between those illnesses, we know that people are ill. I cannot tell them what caused their illnesses, but I have a duty to do everything I can to unearth the cause or causes. Although I do not know whether anyone will ultimately be shown to be to blame, I have a duty to those service men and women to give them the information as openly and as fully as possible, so as to allow them to decide whether someone is to blame and to take appropriate action, as any citizen would.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I pay tribute to the Minister and his colleagues for responding rapidly to the problem. He knows of my interest as chairman of the all-party organophosphates group. One of its members in the other place raised this matter in a debate last night.

Will the Minister go one step further? I took to heart what he said about what he can tell veterans. Will he give a further undertaking that the Government will do everything in their power to learn lessons, so as to ensure that there is no repetition of what happened in the Gulf, and that people in other walks of life who may be exposed to the dangers of OPs are not affected? Will he give a specific undertaking that his Department and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will work closely together to get to the bottom of the problem, because, as he well knows, they have not done so in the past?

Dr. Reid: I can give the hon. Gentleman an assurance on both counts. However, I do not want explicitly or implicitly to lead him to believe that I know that organophosphates are the cause or causes of this illness or these illnesses. There are almost as many suggested causes as there are advocates in the House of the need to support the veterans. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of them. Depleted uranium and organophosphates are suggested causes. It is contended that the use or destruction of chemical weapons could be the cause. There is a range of possibilities, including vaccines and nerve agent pre-treatment tablets. Almost every week there is another suggestion: some believe that it is hysteria, whereas a potentially important paper that was produced last week suggested that there could be an interaction between tablets and organophosphates.

I do not want to say that any of those supposed or alleged causes are, on medical grounds, more proven than others. I give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that we shall try to learn lessons, and shall work closely with the other Departments that are examining the problem.

I mentioned that I had taken some first steps. I met the veterans, and I said that we would explore the possible effects of vaccines and NAP tablets. We have made some progress, and in the not too distant future I shall announce how we propose to carry out that research. I announced that we would put resources into reducing the backlog of people who were waiting for medical examinations, and we have made some progress on that. I made it clear that I would ask for a scientific explanation of the decisions taken to use injections and NAP tablets, and I shall make that public.

Those measures are under way, and I shall make an announcement to the House on them and on a number of other issues when I respond to the Select Committee on Defence in the near future. I promise the House that it will be a matter not of months, but of weeks.

During my meeting with veterans' representatives and through other channels, veterans repeatedly voiced concern about the departure from the medical assessment programme of Group Captain Coker. That matter has been raised in this House and in the other place. Many veterans fear that he was removed from the programme because of his sympathy for them. Whatever the truth of those allegations, I know that he was liked and respected by the veterans, and many wanted him to return to the programme.

I undertook to speak to Group Captain Coker, and during our conversation I invited him back to participate in the medical assessment programme. He did not want to return from the United States, for understandable personal reasons. I offered him a place on an advisory team that will work with me, and he gladly accepted. I am pleased to say that he will come back to assist and advise me, as part of a team, on our general approach. That will not only help our efforts, but send another badly needed sign of good faith to the veterans. I am glad to tell my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North that it has been warmly welcomed on both counts by prominent representatives of the veterans.

My hon. Friend explored in some detail the problems that surround any attempt to research the illnesses now being experienced by some Gulf war veterans. The two epidemiological research studies that the Ministry of Defence is funding, on the recommendation of the Medical Research Council, remain a vital element of our response to veterans' health concerns, because ultimately they alone will tell us whether Gulf veterans are suffering from an excess of ill health, over and above what would have been expected had they not been deployed to the Gulf. I value the MRC's supervision of the programme. The results of all other research that might have a bearing on the veterans' illnesses will ultimately need to be set in the context of the results of that epidemiological research.

However, I was not content—nor were the Government—to wait a further three years, until the results came out, before proceeding with any other relevant research. As my hon. Friend pointed out, last month I announced that new research would be carried out to examine the possible health effects of having multiple vaccinations and taking other medications concurrently. I hope that that research will shed light on the illnesses now experienced by some Gulf veterans, but it is also vital to inform any decision to use medical counter-measures should the same situation ever arise again.

I was more than a little surprised, on those grounds alone, that nothing had been done in six years to find out the effect of the vaccines involved. More detailed

proposals on how the research should be carried out are currently being developed, and, as I have said, I hope to be able to report on progress when I reply to the Defence Committee's paper.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Can we hear some explanation of why the process took so long? Endlessly, a number of then Opposition Members—including me—asked the right questions.

Dr. Reid: If I may quote the old song, there are sometimes more questions than answers, and we are still asking questions. I would like to tell my hon. Friend that I have the answers, but at least we are putting his questions to the test now, and I hope that that is an advance.

As I said, there are a range of possible causes for a possible illness. One suggestion, which may be worthy of investigation, was published in *The Lancet* last week; I have mentioned it before.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North also raised the question of the effects of low-level exposure to organophosphate pesticides on human health, and the question whether that could be a contributing factor in the illnesses now seen in some Gulf veterans. Research is currently under way to try to determine those effects in the context of ill health claimed by some farm workers. As my hon. Friend said, it is sponsored jointly by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Department of Health and the Health and Safety Executive.

The researchers are due to report in 1999, but the Government's present position is and must be that there is no firm evidence at this stage to support a link between low-level exposure to organophosphates and adverse health effects. I also stress that the popular image of Gulf veterans being exposed repeatedly to large quantities of pesticides was not borne out by the thorough investigation conducted last autumn, the result of which was published on 10 December. Nevertheless, we shall continue to work on that field of research, in conjunction with the other agencies that I mentioned.

Questions raised in this morning's press, and yesterday in another place, have given currency to the issue of military tents used in the Gulf that were then sent to scouts. I can tell hon. Members—including those who may have seen reports suggesting that users of MOD surplus tents risk being exposed to organophosphate pesticide that was sprayed on the canvas during the Gulf war—that the Minister for Defence Procurement gave a full answer to a question on the subject in another place on Monday. In view of the time, I do not intend to read that answer at length, but hon. Members can refer to the record.

Since that issue was raised, the scientific advice that I have sought and received on it has been reassuring. However, in view of public concern, today I asked my officials to contact the Scout Association to offer any assistance that the Ministry of Defence can provide. I am glad to tell the House that the tents that were reported as a source of illness have been identified by the association and, at its request, my officials will make arrangements for appropriate tests for the presence of organophosphate compounds. The work will be carried out expeditiously and the results made public as soon as possible.

While we await the results, I should like to reassure the House by reporting what was said in another place yesterday by the Minister for Defence Procurement: all the evidence suggests that, over time, the effects of organophosphates break down. That is why tents have to be continually sprayed. At the moment, there is no evidence to link any of the alleged effects to the alleged tents that were allegedly sprayed with organophosphates. Nevertheless, because of concern in the House and my own concern, we shall take them in and test them. I hope that that will reassure anyone who may be worried. The issue will be resolved quickly.

Many Gulf veterans are frustrated by what they see as woefully inadequate provision of information about what occurred in the Gulf. Medical records are incomplete, and the Government have not yet published full and frank accounts of many incidents during the conflict or of how the vaccination programme was put in place and implemented. That is precisely why I announced last month that I had asked for a full explanation of the scientific basis on which vaccinations were given to our troops.

I enter the caveat that, while I am keen to make a fresh and active start on the issue, I am adamant that I will not make promises that I cannot deliver. Some seven years after the conflict, we may have to accept that some parts of the story will never be known, some records will never be found and some may never have been compiled in the war. However, we shall honestly do everything we can. I am determined that what can be uncovered will be made public in due course in the context of the scientific explanation, although that will involve considerable effort and, perhaps in the long run, some embarrassment and pain.

The scale of the task in pulling together and collating all the information that could have a bearing on, for example, the vaccination programme is significant and it may take some time to complete. I assure the House that I have had full support from, and earnest work and almost tireless application to the task by, the Ministry's officials who have been charged with the work.

I shall deal briefly with war pensions and compensation. The issue of no-fault compensation for Gulf veterans was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North. All such issues will be revisited and progress reported in due course—in weeks rather than months—as part of our response to the Select Committee. I stress that many people do not appreciate that the war pensions scheme already effectively provides generous no-fault compensation to service personnel who have suffered illness or injury as a result of service of any kind.

I shall put the value of war pensions in perspective. My hon. Friend may care to note that a severely disabled single ex-service man can receive a total, tax-free war pension of more than £386 per week, including allowances. I invite my hon. Friend to capitalise that. He raised the issue of the seven-year limit. I fully understand that the burden of proof changes, seven years after the time one leaves the service. That affects only a small number of people in this case and is dealt with by another Department; I am sure that the matter will have been noted by my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Department of Social Security, which deals with those matters.

[Dr. Reid]

Many Gulf veterans who have applied for war pensions left the services only recently and the provision will apply to only a few. I know that there is great frustration over waiting times for assessment, and I hope that that has also been noted by those who deal with these matters in the Department of Social Security, where great efforts are made. However, I am sure that we can achieve more.

There are many leads to be followed and many questions remain unanswered. The Government are determined that no stone will be left unturned in our efforts to understand the reasons for the illnesses of Gulf veterans. My hon. Friend will appreciate that a fresh start has been made, but that it is only a start. I shall ensure that it is carried through. The country would expect us to do nothing less.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 26 June 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Class Sizes

1. **Mr. Colvin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on (a) the gross cost of reducing to under 30 the class sizes of five, six and seven–year–olds and (b) the date by which this will be achieved. [4088]

The Minister for School Standards (Mr. Stephen Byers): Our policy is to reduce class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds to 30 or below by the end of this Parliament. The gross cost will be less than the savings made from phasing out the assisted places scheme.

Mr. Colvin: I am grateful for that reply, but the Institute of Public Finance, whose research is based on the Department's figures, showed that the net cost of reducing class sizes to under 30, even taking into account the savings from the assisted places scheme, is £225 million over five years, which means an annual deficit of £45 million. Where will that money come from? Will it make the black hole in the Government's finances even bigger? It is time that Opposition Members started referring to it as a red hole because the Government are seriously in debt and they will get deeper in debt.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman referred to a cost of £45 million a year, according to that independent survey. For his information, by the turn of the century £100 million will have been saved from the assisted places scheme and annually thereafter the savings will be in excess of £100 million a year. That is adequate funding to honour our pledge to reduce class sizes. The hon. Gentleman is aware that, in the Hampshire local education authority which covers his constituency, there are fewer than 1,300 assisted places whereas 17,000 five, six and seven-year-olds are in classes of more than 30. The hon. Gentleman may defend the privileges of the few; the Labour party will defend the interests of the many.

Mr. Derek Foster: My hon. Friend will know that he has the enthusiastic support of all Labour Members and the whole of the education world for reducing class sizes—the quicker the better. Does he agree that the quality of teaching is equally important if we are to raise standards? He will be aware of the widespread demoralisation in the classroom because of the 18 years of continual denigration by the Conservative party. What will he do to engage the commitment of teachers in raising the quality of, and standards in, education?

Mr. Byers: I agree with my right hon. Friend. The reduction in class sizes must be coupled with high-quality teaching if we are to achieve our ambitious target to raise standards in all schools for all children. We shall shortly publish a White Paper outlining how we intend to raise standards in schools. One of the main elements of the White Paper will be some positive proposals showing how the Government value the teaching profession. We shall take steps to ensure that the profession is valued and that it encourages new entrants and offers high-quality teaching to deliver our commitment to raise standards.

Mrs. Browning: Does the Minister still assert that a minimal cost will be attached to accommodating the additional 38,000 children who would have had assisted places by insisting that their parents put them into schools with surplus capacity, many of which will be sink schools? Is that the Government's policy? Is that where those children will go?

Mr. Byers: I welcome the hon. Lady to her new position and congratulate her on her appointment.

The Government believe that classes of more than 30 pupils become not so much a valuable learning experience as a question of crowd control. We are no longer prepared to tolerate that situation. There is a rich irony in the question posed by Conservative Members. Today we published new figures showing that, in primary schools, one in three young people are in a class of more than 30 pupils. That is an increase of 85,000 children on last year's figures. We have signalled our intention to reduce class sizes. Phasing out the assisted places scheme will do that by providing the resources to ensure that we can deliver our manifesto pledge.

Mr. Stevenson: Is my hon. Friend aware that in my constituency alone, at least 3,500 five, six and seven-year-olds are being taught in classes of more than 30, and some in classes of more than 40? Is he also aware that that is a disgraceful legacy of 18 years of Conservative government? My hon. Friend's commitment to phase out the assisted places scheme and to reduce class sizes is very welcome. Can he tell us when that process will begin?

Mr. Byers: The money will start being freed up from September next year, as we phase out the assisted places scheme. As soon as possible, we will use those resources to reduce class sizes in my hon. Friend's constituency and throughout the country. That is one of the key pledges that the Labour party gave during the general election campaign, and it was one of the reasons for our overwhelming victory on 1 May. We give notice that overcrowded classes will come to an end, because we will honour the pledge that we gave to the British people.

Unskilled Manual Workers

2. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the employment prospects for unskilled manual workers over the coming three years; and if he will make a statement. [4091]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Alan Howarth): Our intention, through our welfare-to-work policies, is to improve the job prospects of unskilled people by enhancing their skills and employability. That is essential if we are to create an economy with high and stable levels of employment, in which all have the opportunity to prosper.

Mr. Fabricant: Does the Minister recall that in a previous existence, he said that it was businesses, not Governments, that created jobs? I welcome any scheme that will improve job prospects, but what will happen after the first year, when the money runs out? Will the Minister introduce a one-off windfall tax every year, or will he throw the people on the schemes out of work?

Mr. Howarth: It is indeed businesses that create jobs, and Governments who create the conditions in which businesses can create jobs. We are determined that the role of this Government should be to encourage and enable businesses to create good-quality jobs. I assure the hon. Gentleman that our costings for the new deal are well considered, and that the programme will be carried through the life of this Parliament. It will give young people the opportunity that they should have to develop their skills and employability, so that we can enhance the capacity of our economy to generate wealth and to provide security and employment.

Mr. MacShane: Is my hon. Friend aware that Britain has the highest level of unemployment among young males, and that in my constituency, where there are no more jobs left in coal or steel, that is a pressing problem? In the planning that he and his colleagues are putting into effect for the windfall tax, will he undertake to consider particularly the problem of young men, so that the lost generation, condemned under the Tories, can have some hope under the new Government?

Mr. Howarth: I fully understand and sympathise with what my hon. Friend says. His constituency has been through extraordinary adversity, as has the constituency that I represent, which is also an important steel-making part of Britain. Our new deal will offer better opportunities for those who are long-term unemployed—beyond two years—and for the young people whom my hon. Friend mentioned, so that we will be able to provide for them good-quality placements with employers, which will include an important dimension of education and training opportunities to enable them to enhance their skills and to be better placed for the future.

Mr. Boswell: I welcome the Minister on his return to the Department where we both served in different capacities. Given that youth unemployment has been falling for the past five years at a steady rate of 100,000 per annum, can he tell the House how much extra will be contributed by the welfare-to-work scheme? What mechanism will he set up to differentiate between the improvements that he seeks and claims and the improvements that are already taking place because of the buoyancy of the economy that he inherited?

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for those comments. Yes, the whirligig of time produces unpredictable effects.

While we must be pleased that unemployment has fallen from its worst levels, the reality is that one in five households have no one of working age in employment. The social security bill has doubled in real terms since 1979. We face very grave problems, and unemployment remains shamefully high. We must act now. The new deal involves a strategy on a far larger scale than anything we have seen before. It will offer a choice of quality options and preparation, through a gateway, to ensure that people are counselled and steered towards the best opportunities for them. Employers have already made a very enthusiastic commitment to the strategy. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will welcome this serious strategy to address the problems that remain even after the improvements that we have seen.

Ms Hewitt: I welcome the Government's initiative in persuading business leaders to begin to commit to participating in the welfare-to-work programme. What steps will the Government take to ensure that small and medium-sized businesses in my constituency and throughout the country have an opportunity to participate as well?

Mr. Howarth: It is important to build upon the very encouraging response that we received yesterday from senior people in Britain's top companies. They committed themselves—I think without hesitation—to supporting the Government and the strategy that we are unfolding.

Of course, we must reach out beyond the people with whom we were engaged in dialogue yesterday. I am pleased to confirm that representatives of prominent small business organisations were also present. We shall organise a series of regional conferences, and we intend to exchange views through constructive dialogue with employers across the country.

Mr. Dorrell: Is there not a contradiction at the heart of the Government's employment policy? The Government seem to believe that the prospects of the young unemployed may be improved by introducing a subsidy of £60 a week to reduce the cost of employing them, while the prospects of other unemployed people may be improved by introducing a minimum wage and increasing the cost of employing them. Which approach does the Minister think is more likely to prove successful?

Mr. Howarth: I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman has assumed his new position. We look forward to his constructive and humane contribution to the national debate on these issues. However, his question is not necessarily a notable advance in the debate.

The right hon. Gentleman cannot accept that the most disadvantaged in the labour market—the long-term unemployed, including young people who have been unemployed for more than six months, and people of low and no skills—are left to fester in unemployment. I do not think that he wants that. Equally, I do not suppose that he is really happy to see 100,000 people earning less than £1.50 an hour and 200,000 people earning less than £2 an hour. That is not decent. It is also short-sighted because our employers need to invest in skills and quality; they cannot compete simply on the basis of cheapness.

Teaching Methods

3. **Mrs. Organ:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to ensure that good practice in respect of teaching methods is disseminated throughout the education service. [4092]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Estelle Morris): We have today announced major changes to initial teacher training, based on best practice, intended to ensure that all new teachers know how to teach the basics effectively. These changes are crucial to raising standards across the system and to meeting the new demanding targets that we have set for literacy and numeracy. I shall place details of the new requirements in the Library.

Mrs. Organ: I welcome my hon. Friend's answer, which constitutes a major step in raising standards in education and, more importantly, raising the standards of the profession and teacher morale. However, we must go further and raise standards for 11-year-olds at key stage 2. Does my hon. Friend intend to set targets for children at key stage 2? If so, what will they be and when will they be delivered? The target level attainment by 11-year-olds was appalling under the previous Government, with only 54 per cent. reaching the expected levels in mathematics and 57 per cent. in English.

Ms Morris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who recognises the need to raise morale and skill and knowledge levels for new teachers who are going into the profession. The targets that we have set for both literacy and numeracy for key stage 2 are at the centre of the rest of our education policies. By 2002, we expect 75 per cent. of 11-year-olds to reach the standards expected of their age in mathematics, and in English, 80 per cent. They are demanding targets—I think that they can be reached—that will lift ambition. If we cannot do that for our 11-year-olds and equip them to have access to the curriculum in the secondary school, we have no right to be in government and to say that we are running an education system.

These are targets that we all live and die by. Part of the problem with the previous Government was that they set targets for others. They were never prepared to take responsibility themselves. The present Government are prepared to stand behind their targets and play their part in ensuring that our children get the best, because that is what they deserve.

Dr. Julian Lewis: We welcome any attempt by the Government to raise education standards, but is the Minister aware that the introduction of sound teaching methods has increased standards at Testwood school, Totton, in my constituency, from an achievement of just 18 per cent. at five grade A to C GSCEs eight years ago to 59 per cent. last year? If she is aware of that, will she please explain why a Minister in her Department has decided to reject the advice of the Funding Agency for Schools, that of the present hon. Member and of his predecessor to grant a sixth form to an outstandingly successful grant-maintained school?

Ms Morris: I congratulate the school in the hon. Gentleman's constituency on reaching such good levels of attainment. I ask the hon. Gentleman to pass on my congratulations and, I am sure, those of my hon. Friends. He will know that when we consider whether sixth forms should be added to schools, we apply a range of considerations, and that the quality of teaching and learning is only one criterion. The hon. Gentleman will know also that what happens in one school has an effect on others in the locality. Although I am not familiar with the application that he talks about, I am sure that my hon. Friends took into account all the circumstances and the evidence that was put before them.

Mr. Don Foster: I am sure that the Minister agrees that it is important to establish and set targets. I hope that she will agree, however, that it is vital that teachers are given the assistance that they need to ensure that pupils reach the targets that are set.

I welcome the Minister's statement on initial teacher training. However, in view of her comments during the passage of the Education Act 1994, does she not now believe that the failed experiment of school- centred initial teacher training should be abandoned? Will she explain on whose authority the chief inspector of schools, Mr. Chris Woodhead, possibly in cahoots with Prince Charles, is promoting school-centred initial teacher training?

Ms Morris: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the national curriculum for in-service teacher training, which will play its part in raising standards. I remain convinced that we need a combination of sound practice in schools and strong links with institutions of higher education if we are to train people to be effective teachers, and that is how the curriculum will be judged.

Youth Unemployment (Wolverhampton)

4. **Mr. Purchase:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to move into work long-term unemployed young people in Wolverhampton who are on welfare. [4093]

The Minister for Employment and Disability Rights (Mr. Andrew Smith): In Wolverhampton, as in other parts of the country, under our new deal for young unemployed people between the ages of 18 and 24, we will offer quality opportunities to take jobs, and to gain relevant education, training and work experience.

The Employment Service will work in partnership with the business community, voluntary organisations and other bodies to ensure that the initiative is effective in Wolverhampton and elsewhere.

Mr. Purchase: Is not my right hon. Friend horrified to learn that even the fiddled figures that we put up with under the Conservatives show that 43 per cent. of young people in Wolverhampton have been unemployed for more than three months, and more than 20 per cent. have been unemployed for a year or longer? Does he agree that Conservative policies led to unsustainably high interest rates, which choked off the job-creating investment required in the west midlands and elsewhere that would have put an end to that problem? We should have been enjoying a boom in jobs for young people.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right to be shocked at the level of unemployment in his constituency, which means

suffering for individuals. There is a corrosive effect on the whole community of having a workless class disconnected from mainstream opportunities. That is why we need the programmes in the new deal for the young and long-term unemployed, and why we need the wider policies for macro-economic stability as a platform for economic success and expansion, which our right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will set out in the Budget.

Jobseeker's Allowance

5. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will pay the jobseeker's allowance to all those people unemployed and seeking work, according to the labour force survey definition. [4094]

Mr. Andrew Smith: No. The jobseeker's allowance is payable to people who meet certain conditions that are set down in law—the right hon. Gentleman had a part in that. Some of the people who are classified as unemployed under the labour force survey definition would not meet those conditions.

Mr. Forth: Will the Minister give the House an undertaking that, should there be a review of the methodology for calculating and publishing the unemployment figures, whatever the result of that review, full benefit will be paid through the jobseeker's allowance to everyone who is declared to be unemployed?

Mr. Smith: As the right hon. Gentleman is aware, a review is being carried out by the Office for National Statistics. I thought that there was agreement by the Opposition as well as by the Government that it should pay more attention to the labour force survey. I trust that the hon. Gentleman agrees with me that benefits should go to those who need them most.

Mr. Ernie Ross: May I suggest that my right hon. Friend ignores any advice from the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), who, when he had this responsibility, participated in the 23 fiddles to reduce the claimant count? When he gave evidence to the Select Committee on Education and Employment, he was 100 per cent. opposed to using the labour force survey to determine how many people were looking for work.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is entirely right to contrast the Government's consistency with the Opposition's inconsistency. The important thing about the review is that it is conducted at arm's length from government, so that we re-establish public confidence in the credibility and trustworthiness of official statistics. The statistics will not be politically manipulated by us as they were by the previous Government.

Mr. Keith Simpson: May I take the Minister up on his use of the word "consistency"? To help in his quest for funds for unemployment, has he made any representations to his right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the privatisation of air traffic control?

Mr. Smith: I am not sure how that matter falls within the definition of "official statistics". We have been consistent on that, as on all the other matters in our election manifesto. Unlike Conservative Members, when we promise a fair and impartial review of official statistics that is conducted at arm's length from government, we deliver our promise, whereas the hon. Gentleman's hon. Friends broke theirs.

Mr. Sanders: If the Conservatives fiddled the unemployment figures, why does not the Minister simply reverse the changes that they made?

Mr. Smith: Because it is important to re-establish public confidence in the statistics and methodology. That must not be done on a party political basis. We must decide together and try to find a consensus on the statistics that can command public confidence. That is what we need, not just for the purposes of the Government but for wider use by the economic community and the public.

Youth Unemployment

6. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to move young unemployed people on welfare into work. [4095]

13. **Ms Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what are the Government's plans to assist the young unemployed. [4103]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): I refer my hon. Friends to the reply given earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, North–East (Mr. Purchase) by the Minister for Employment and Disability Rights.

Mr. Healey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. He will be glad to know that there are already projects in operation and plans in the pipeline in the Rotherham area which offer real training and job prospects to the young and the long-term unemployed. How do the Government plan to draw on such experience, good practice and ideas as they draw up the precise details of the new deal programme?

Mr. Blunkett: I am delighted to hear that action is already being taken in my hon. Friend's constituency to prepare for the announcement to be made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer next Wednesday, and for the subsequent programme in which we shall engage.

The record of attainment of those born in my hon. Friend's constituency has been considerable. The Leader of the Opposition greatly benefited there from past practice of investing in education and employability. Our task will be to ensure that all children in the constituency and across the country enjoy quality programmes and quality education backed up by quality training. That will give them a real chance to earn their own living and lift themselves out of dependence on the state.

Ms Ellman: Is the Secretary of State aware that my constituency has the second highest unemployment rate in the country, with recorded male unemployment reaching 26.7 per cent. and nearly a third of the unemployment in Riverside being among young people? Can he confirm that, in effecting a good programme of opportunities, jobs and skills, the new deal will work with the many

examples of community and co-operative enterprise that are already operating successfully in Liverpool, Riverside along with the private sector?

Mr. Blunkett: I recognise the enormous problems that affect my hon. Friend's constituency. Our programme must tackle not just the quality of the offers and choices being made but the lack of hope and the desperation which generational unemployment has brought to my hon. Friend's area and many others. That is why our programme will prepare young people by giving them education, social skills and real opportunities. It will build on the initiatives of community and voluntary groups by drawing together such programmes and enfranchising such agreements locally. In that way we can build on the best already in existence and invest in the future of the young people who were written off by the previous Government.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: Apart from munching a croissant and drinking his coffee at the breakfast meeting at No. 11 Downing street, did the right hon. Gentleman have time to listen to any of the guests? If not, will he consult the speech by Sir Ian Prosser, chairman of Bass, in which he made it quite clear that labour market flexibility and low non-wage labour costs meant that we had better employment figures than the rest of Europe? By contrast, the right hon. Gentleman's policies will choke off people's ability to take on employees. They could end up subsidising them under the welfare-to-work scheme, which will lead to folly and substitution.

Mr. Blunkett: I am sure that the right hon. Lady knows more about croissants than I do. Unfortunately, although I was there on time I did not manage to get one. It just goes to show how much I am likely to get out of No. 11 in future. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] I was just testing whether Conservative Members were still awake.

The right hon. Lady will of course be aware that the level of unemployment among young people in Germany is lower than it is in the United Kingdom. It is lower because of Germany's investment in skills and training—its vocational investment—through which people can take up apprenticeships and opportunity. That is why, at the business breakfast, the employers present, small as well as large, have overwhelmingly committed themselves to joining us in partnership. In return, we said that we would listen to their concerns and join them in ensuring that the programmes that we set forward have universal support, so that we can build a consensus to rid ourselves of hopelessness and end the exclusion of a whole generation of people. Given the right hon. Lady's background and her commitment in the past to overcoming poverty, I expect her to join us in that endeavour.

Mr. Willetts: Will the Secretary of State confirm that unemployment among young people is falling strongly and has fallen by 400,000 in the past four years? How much better than that does he expect to do in the next four years?

Mr. Blunkett: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new position.

I want the target to be to reduce unemployment among people under 25 to the same level as that among adult workers—rather than its being double or treble that level—so that we ensure that young people become accustomed to being at work in the morning and to being able to earn their own living, rather than depending on others. Any civilised society will be judged by what it does to give young people a real drive to enterprise and the ability to earn their living in a civilised fashion.

Ms Hodge: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the tremendous progress that he has made in a mere eight weeks, even without breakfast, as compared with the disastrous 18 years that preceded them. As part of the welfare-to-work programme, is he considering using some of the resources to expand child care facilities, particularly for mothers and lone parents who want to work but cannot because they do not have access to affordable child care?

Mr. Blunkett: We as a Department, with the Ministry for women, will ensure that we co-ordinate education, child care and family learning. It is critical that those who enter full-time education and training in particular have facilities that enable them to take up that option. Above all, it is critical that they are able, during the programme and afterwards, to earn a living like other families, and that the widest possible choice of under-fives facilities is available.

Mr. Roy Beggs: I welcome the Government's commitment to assist employers to take on young unemployed—and perhaps some long-term unemployed—persons, but does the Secretary of State agree that, when there has been subsidy, some unscrupulous employers have exploited it and, instead of creating full-time posts, have continued to take on subsidised employees? Will he monitor the scheme closely to ensure that there is no abuse?

Mr. Blunkett: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. There is always a danger in such circumstances. Employers and the Employment Service agree that they should assist us in monitoring the situation. Obviously, as Winston Churchill once pointed out, if the worst employer is undercut by the very worst, no one gains.

Training Investment

7. **Mr. Öpik:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans to increase investment in training. [4096]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Dr. Kim Howells): Our proposals for increasing participation in training by individuals and employers will be set out in a White Paper on lifelong learning in the autumn.

Mr. Öpik: While I welcome any initiative that improves the general level of skills and education, does the Minister agree that many skills shortages are created by the relatively high cost of skills training in certain sectors, such as engineering? Will he commit the Government to ensuring that priority funding goes into the sectors where there are skills shortages to ensure that British industry as a whole does not feel that the Government are, let us say, tilting at windfalls?

Dr. Howells: Well, I do not know whether there are any national vocational qualifications in windmill

construction, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman: we have to be imaginative in trying to procure for training purposes the very best state-of-the art machinery, especially in engineering, science and similar disciplines. It is very worrying that, all too often, further education colleges, universities and other institutions tend to go for the softer options—the cheaper courses—rather than concentrate on those that require a good deal of expensive machinery.

Mr. Pike: Does my hon. Friend think that training and enterprise councils are sufficiently accountable, locally and nationally, for the training that they deliver in view of the investment in them? Should not more be done to make them more accountable?

Dr. Howells: There is no doubt that the performance of TECs is extremely patchy. The Government are determined to introduce performance standards that can be monitored, that TECs should be much more accountable, and that they should co-ordinate their activities much more closely with FE colleges, local authorities and universities in their area. That is how they can maximise their input into their regional economies.

Mr. Rowe: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that it is good for the morale of a profession to have its training prescribed by politicians without relevant professional qualifications? If so, can we look forward to statements from the Secretary of State for Health on how doctors might be trained to perform operations or from the Secretary of State for Transport on how to drive a train?

Dr. Howells: No.

Non-vocational Education

8. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received regarding the funding of non–vocational education. [4097]

Dr. Howells: No representations have been received specifically on this topic. My right hon. Friend recently announced the formation of a national advisory group on adult learning to advise on all issues of adult learning, including funding.

Mr. Barnes: Did not the previous Government create a dangerous divide between the funding of non-vocational and vocational education which often led to non-vocational education being priced out of the market? I spent 21 years in adult education and always thought that there was a clear connection between vocational and non-vocational education—*[Interruption.]* Some hon. Members would benefit from my teaching. Are the Government going to tackle the problem created by the previous Government?

Dr. Howells: The division of responsibility between the Further Education Funding Council and local education authorities for securing adequate further education stems from the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. The FEFC is responsible for securing adequate provision of those courses described—I have to be careful here—in the Act under schedule 2 as having national significance, such as basic skills courses, access courses and those which lead to academic or vocational qualifications. Local education authorities have been made responsible for all other kinds of courses, including those called recreational or of a leisure nature.

If my hon. Friend examines the record of Tuesday night's Adjournment debate, he will see that unless we clear up the ambiguities in what constitutes a schedule 2 and a non-schedule 2 course, we shall be in big trouble with funding. In that debate, hon. Members on both sides of the House mentioned a number of enterprises that are owed a great deal of money by the FEFC and colleges that have contracted with them. There is ambiguity about whether their courses are schedule 2 courses. The Government will resolve that problem.

Mr. Stunell: Will the Minister take note of early-day motion 166 which refers particularly to the funding of colleges? Is he aware of the parliamentary answer I received to the effect that the allocation of funding to colleges and courses is a matter for the colleges to decide? My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) mentioned engineering training. How are colleges to pay for such expensive courses in the light of the Minister's previous answers?

Dr. Howells: The funding of further education colleges is the responsibility of the FEFC, which is closely monitored by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. The colleges have to make a case for increased funding. If they cannot, they do not receive increased funding. If they show that they have a good intake of students who will be studying courses that will lead to accreditation in technical and scientific subjects, money will be made available, but the colleges have to prove that first and they must have good courses that are properly inspected and delivered.

Child Care

9. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans his Department has to ensure co–ordination between early-years education and child care. [4098]

Mr. Blunkett: With other Ministers, the Department has asked local authorities to draw together early-years forums to establish interim early-years development plans and to have programmes in place by next April for the co-ordination of nursery education and child care. That builds on our commitment to early excellence centres, ensuring that from the time a child is born, developmental skills, including the learning process, are encouraged as much as possible. I am delighted that more than 80 local authorities have already responded, showing their commitment and enthusiasm for early-years development plans. I am sorry that my hon. Friend's county council—Essex—is not one of them.

Angela Smith: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Is he aware that, after years of neglect, when Essex county council was under Conservative control, and despite the attempts of the new Liberal Democrat-Labour administration, we still have one of the lowest levels of nursery education and pre-school provision in the country? Will he encourage Essex county

council to take those comments on board and to work with the providers of pre-school education in my constituency, who are keen for our policies to be put into practice?

Mr. Blunkett: I certainly shall. During its four years in office, the Liberal Democrat-Labour coalition began the process of trying to reverse the worst record in Britain, with only three nursery education providers operating in the state sector under the previous Tory regime. That was a scandalous record.

It will take us a little time to ensure that coverage is available across the country, but we have made clear our commitment to ending the voucher scheme from the end of this term and to providing free places for all four-year-olds. Working with the voluntary sector and others who are committed to providing places, we shall ensure that that essential pledge is carried out in the next 12 months.

Mrs. May: Is the Secretary of State aware of the considerable anxiety that has been caused among providers of pre-school education and parents by his decision to abolish the nursery voucher scheme before putting proper alternative arrangements in place? Will he clarify the criteria under which local authorities will be able to reduce the amount that is reimbursed to providers in the voluntary and private sectors—a move that many fear will lead only to a reduction in the provision of pre-school education?

Mr. Blunkett: I have no evidence of that and I have received no letters from the hon. Lady's constituents in Maidenhead saying that they feel threatened. We have made it clear that existing places that are carried forward into the autumn term will be honoured. We have set in place mechanisms to ensure that, where there is doubt, a certificate will be issued to that effect. There is no threat to anyone currently providing a place. They will not receive less for that place than they received from the public purse under the voucher scheme. We have encouraged local authorities of all persuasions to work with providers so that there is a collaborative, joint approach rather than the competitive market that closed private and voluntary providers in the pilot scheme areas and, after 1 April, in other areas when the voucher scheme came into operation.

Reading

10. **Mr. Dismore:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to help those pupils leaving primary school this summer who have fallen behind in their reading. [4099]

Mr. Byers: The Government launched a pilot of 29 literacy summer schools on 3 June for pupils leaving primary school this summer who have not reached level four in their national curriculum tests. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced an expansion to the literacy summer schools to cover 50 schools and some 1,600 pupils.

Mr. Dismore: I am sure that many hon. Members share my experience; time and again constituents visit my surgery with problems that have become far worse because they cannot read and write and therefore cannot understand the letters they receive from the local council, the Department of Social Security and, especially, the privatised utilities. That is the result of the previous Government's education policy, which turned out illiterate and semi-literate pupils from primary schools who had little chance of succeeding at secondary school. May I compliment my hon. Friend on the welcome and imaginative scheme he has just announced, which will go a long way towards achieving the Government's target of ensuring that, by 2002, 80 per cent. of 11-year-olds leaving primary school reach their proper reading age?

Mr. Byers: The literacy summer schools are an exciting initiative. They are part of a pilot scheme which we hope to expand in future years to cover thousands of young people and hundreds of schools. We recognise that a person's future will be blighted for ever if they cannot read. It is a fundamental issue that has to be tackled. We intend to do so.

Mr. Soames: I warmly welcome the hon. Gentleman's announcement, but he needs to use some cavalry dash. It is plain that the scheme will be a success, so why does he not expand it straight away? It does not need a pilot and should be implemented immediately on a much greater scale.

Mr. Byers: It is rather ironic that the hon. Gentleman should make that comment when the Government of which he was a member had only one programme for literacy—the reading recovery programme—which was scrapped two years ago. We have been in office for two months. The pilot programmes are exciting and we intend to expand them in future years. I hope that, in due course, we may be able to initiate one in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Training

11. **Mr. Gordon Marsden:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to move young unemployed people into training. [4100]

Dr. Howells: The Government have a wide range of proposals to involve young people in quality training. We shall take them forward on a firm basis of consultation and partnership.

Mr. Marsden: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments, which I am sure will be welcome to my constituents in Blackpool who have been relentlessly affected by high unemployment, particularly in the youth sector. Seasonal unemployment, particularly in coastal and seaside towns, remains an important issue. Many of my constituents, particularly women in low-paid jobs, have problems in that respect. What specific plans and assurances can he offer to take into account seasonal unemployment when training programmes are put into effect?

Dr. Howells: I am well aware of the special problems that arise from the seasonal nature of many employment opportunities in seaside and tourism centres such as my hon. Friend's constituency. I am also aware that young people there have the lowest staying-on rate in the west Lancashire area and that there is high unemployment among 16 and 17-year-olds. My hon. Friend will know

that the Government have pledged themselves to a range of measures, included in Target 2000, to get all 16 and 17-year-olds on the road to a proper qualification. We plan to replace the failed youth training programme with high-quality training and we will give under-18s in work the right to study for an approved qualification. Combined with a concerted drive to attract new employment to west Lancashire, we believe that we can make real inroads into addressing youth unemployment.

Mr. Dorrell: The Government make a great deal of their welfare-to-work proposals. They have also made it absolutely clear that those proposals will be paid for by the so-called windfall levy. How will the schemes be funded when the windfall is exhausted?

Dr. Howells: I thought that that was obvious. The windfall levy will help to perform the trick that the previous Government, whom we displaced recently, could not perform—getting people back to work so that they start paying taxes and the unemployment rate and the benefits bill fall. That is how we will achieve our targets.

Technology College Status

12. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he plans to announce his decision concerning the current round of bids for technology college status. [4102]

Ms Estelle Morris: I announced the names of the 16 successful schools on 18 June.

Mr. Hoyle: Will my hon. Friend give favourable consideration to the application by Southlands school, when it is resubmitted? Will she accept that the school has the support of good business interests and fine financial support from the whole community? In the next round, favourable consideration will be important for Southlands, and for Gable Hall school in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith).

Ms Morris: I am glad that, from what my hon. Friend says, Southlands school intends to rebid for technology status in the next round. Many good schools put in good-quality bids, but were not awarded technology or other specialist status this year. My hon. Friend will know that we are about to announce new criteria for technology status that will mean that the benefits can be shared with other schools and the community. I hope that such co-operation will be reflected in the new bid from Southlands school.

Mr. Garnier: Will the Minister tell me precisely why she refused the application by the Robert Smyth school in my constituency for technology status? Her letter to me did not do so.

Ms Morris: As I have just said, we received far more applications for specialist status than we had resources to allocate. Some of the applications were very good and schools should not think that they have failed. I hope that they will be encouraged to try again and that the hon. and learned Gentleman will encourage the school in his constituency. If the school that he mentions would like feedback on its application, perhaps we may talk outside the Chamber to ensure that it has the support to make an even better bid next time.

Job Security

14. **Mr. Mullin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for improving job security; and if he will make a statement. [4104]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The best form of job security is knowing one can get another job if one has to. That is why we aim to deliver a successful economy with high and sustainable levels of employment and skilled and employable workers.

Mr. Mullin: Is my hon. Friend aware—I am sure that he is—that one of the spin-offs of privatisation is that many people no longer qualify for protection from unfair dismissal, for holiday and sickness pay, or for other benefits that we used quaintly to associate with civilisation? Do we have any plans to return to the circumstances of the early 1980s, when more people qualified for such benefits?

Mr. Howarth: We are committed to basic human rights in the workplace—unlike the Conservatives. Many of us have been saddened and shocked by instances in our constituencies of bad employers abusing the deregulation introduced by the Conservatives and sacking employees before they attained employment rights. Those practices are ethically unacceptable and feckless. Employers should invest in the skills and loyalty of their work force.

Mr. Brady: Does the Minister accept that the introduction of schemes to subsidise employment for the long-term young unemployed will create a displacement effect? Will not that increase job insecurity for others?

Mr. Howarth: We do not contend that job subsidy schemes are likely to generate many new jobs; we believe that they will enhance the employability of many people in our work force and that that will strengthen Britain's competitive capacity.

Mr. Blizzard: I am sure that my hon. Friend will be aware that people who are recovering from mental illness often have great difficulty obtaining employment. Will such people be able to benefit from the Government's welfare-to-work programme so that they can enjoy job security?

Mr. Howarth: We are concerned that, in the development of our welfare-to-work policies, attention is given to the needs of disabled people, including those who are unfortunate enough to suffer from mental illness.

Spending Priorities

15. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to review his Department's spending priorities on young people's education. [4105]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend intends to review all aspects of his Department's spending priorities, including

those in relation to young people's education, as part of his review of the Department's spending plans, according to the arrangements announced to the House on 11 June by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Mr. Jack: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply and for the information about the nature of the review. As he is considering the future use of resources, may I draw his attention to the excellent Office for Standards in Education report on the Pear Tree school in my constituency, which deals with children with severe learning difficulties? May I seek his assurance that the review will address the deployment of resources in connection with the difficulties that the school has, after all the work that it has put in on its pupils, finding them appropriate training, jobs or other arrangements after their education is concluded?

Dr. Howells: I know of the special interest that the right hon. Gentleman takes in the excellent special needs teaching at the Pear Tree school and the tremendous results achieved there. We consider such matters a great priority and will certainly address them in the review that we are shortly to undertake. The results will be incorporated in the lifelong learning White Paper in the autumn.

Voting (Madam Speaker's Statement)

3.30 pm

Madam Speaker: I have a short statement to make. Members will be well aware of the inconvenience arising on many recent occasions from the exceptionally high numbers voting in the same Lobby, and of the time taken to complete Divisions. I believe that there has been some improvement in the past few days, but there may be scope for further amelioration of the problem.

Accordingly, following a recommendation by the Modernisation Committee, a third desk is to be added in each Division Lobby with effect from Monday 30 June, as a short-term solution, at least. I hope that, on the first few occasions, the Whips will be on hand in the Lobbies to assist Members. The Modernisation Committee will monitor progress and study longer-term options.

Business of the House

3.31 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): May I first thank you for that statement, Madam Speaker? The Modernisation Committee was keen to move quickly, and we are happy to have your co-operation on the matter of the third desks.

The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 30 JUNE—Motion relating to the Scottish Grand Committee.

Motion on the Northern Ireland Act 1974 (Interim Period Extension) Order.

Motion on the Satellite Television Service Regulations.

TUESDAY 1 JULY—Debate on the review of international development policies on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

WEDNESDAY 2 JULY—Until 2 pm, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will open his Budget Statement.

THURSDAY 3 JULY AND FRIDAY 4 JULY—Continuation of the Budget debate.

MONDAY 7 JULY—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South–West Norfolk): I thank the Leader of the House for giving the business for next week and the following Monday. I should be grateful if she would outline the proposed arrangements for the Budget debate. Obviously, she has confirmed that next Friday represents the replacement of a non-sitting day.

Will the right hon. Lady also, as a matter of urgency, arrange for a statement to clarify whether Labour Members of Parliament have the freedom to take a full and active part in debate on the referendum campaigns in Scotland and Wales? I feel sure that the House will agree that such clarification is essential, following the explicit refutation of the Prime Minister's statement in the House yesterday by the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith), whose reputation for integrity is respected throughout the House. Will the right hon. Lady also say whether there are to be different freedoms of expression for her Back-Bench colleagues according to whether they represent Welsh or Scottish constituencies?

Will the right hon. Lady clarify the position of the hon. Members for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Sarwar) and for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) with regard to their ability to carry out duties in the House and to represent their constituents? Will she confirm that both Members are to be referred to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards?

Finally, will the Leader of the House provide time for a statement on the tax-raising powers of a putative Scottish Parliament or Assembly, following the confusion in Scotland yesterday about the Government's intentions? She will no doubt wish to say when we can expect the White Paper detailing precisely what the Government intend in that regard. I am sure that she will wish to give a categorical assurance today that the White Paper will be produced in time to allow a thorough debate on its contents before the House rises for the summer recess.

Mrs. Taylor: First, I welcome the right hon. Member for South–West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) to her position

as shadow Leader of the House, and I welcome also the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) to his position as her deputy.

On the Budget debate, I am pleased that we were able to accommodate the representations that were made. We have suggested that the debate should take place on what would have been a non-sitting Friday. It will be a non-voting day, and that will be for the convenience of hon. Members who may wish to speak in the debate, but who are not necessarily worried about speaking on the day on which we vote. We intend to reinstate the non-sitting Friday, and we will consult on that in due course.

In respect of the shadow Leader's comments on Labour Members and the referendums, there is no need for a debate on this matter next week. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made the position perfectly clear yesterday, when he said that hon. Members were perfectly entitled to speak their mind. That remains the case.

So far as the hon. Members for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Sarwar) and for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) are concerned, they remain Members of Parliament, and are entitled to use the facilities of this House. They have been suspended from the parliamentary Labour party—which is not a matter for this House—and have been reported to the Parliamentary Commissioner because of the allegations that have been made. The custom, and the insistence of the Parliamentary Commissioner, is that there should be no discussion of cases under review.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): What about Neil Hamilton?

Mrs. Taylor: The right hon. and learned Gentleman refers to a certain ex-Member of this House. He will find it very difficult to find anything that I said about that case when I was a Back Bencher. Conservative Members ought to obey the rules of this House, and help to make our system of standards and privileges work. They should stand by the Parliamentary Commissioner and the new system that we have instigated. If Conservative Members want a debate on how we govern ourselves and rule out sleaze, we should be willing to look at that in due course.

As for the tax-raising powers of a Scottish Parliament, I think that the only confusion existed in the newspapers yesterday. There is no change whatsoever in the situation. I can confirm that the White Paper will be published next month, and my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Scotland have made clear that there will be a debate on it.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): As someone who never allows himself to be gagged under any circumstances, may I ask my right hon. Friend whether we can have a statement next week on the pressures that were applied to stop the Princess of Wales attending a meeting yesterday on land mines—a humanitarian subject which is certainly not a party political matter? Is my right hon. Friend aware that, in today's *The Daily Telegraph*, the former Conservative Cabinet Minister Lord Deedes said that Conservative Members were totally wrong to stop the Princess coming here?

Mrs. Taylor: The Government are not responsible for who attends meetings in Westminster, but I agree that this should not be a party political matter—land mines are too serious for that. I hope that Members from all parties support the actions that the Government have taken.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): On behalf of my Liberal Democrat colleagues, I warmly welcome the Government's second thoughts on the arrangements for the Budget debate. We are grateful. May I draw attention to the difficulty that would have been caused—I hope that it will not happen in future—by having very important Divisions late on a Thursday evening for hon. Members with far-flung constituencies? [HON. MEMBERS: "Shame."]

May I also draw the right hon. Lady's attention to the fact that, under the Jopling proposals, it was the plan—I thought that it was agreed on both sides of the House—that, on Thursdays before non-sitting Fridays, there would not be late votes. In future, will she be able to give us advance notice of non-sitting constituency Fridays, as they are important for the planning of Members' diaries?

Finally, is it true that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is this afternoon meeting the directors of McDonald's to impress on them the importance of renewing the sourcing of their products from British beef producers? If so, and if he is not successful in those representations, can we have an early statement and debate so that we can impress on McDonald's and the other burger chains what damage they have done to British industry—to the farming industry in particular, but not exclusively—so that they can at long last apologise for the damage done, and perhaps eat humble pie?

Mrs. Taylor: With regard to what the hon. Gentleman said about the Budget, the expanded debate is partly the result of pressures and partly because we were reluctant to have votes late on a Thursday night when there could have been a succession of votes. Despite the comments of Conservative Members, it is a good principle that we should try to avoid a succession of votes late on a Thursday whenever possible. Clearly, it will not always be possible, but if we can avoid it, we should. There will, however, be pressures on time in July, and we want to discuss how we can best deal with them through the usual channels. I hope that we can get some agreement there.

On the hon. Gentleman's remarks about my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and his meeting with McDonald's, I can confirm that that meeting has taken place. I believe that significant progress was made, and that McDonald's will make a statement later in the day. The fact that we have got to this stage shows how successful the new Ministers have been in turning around a difficult situation.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will the Leader of the House try to find time for a debate on channel tunnel safety as soon as possible? She will have noticed the questions on the Order Paper relating to a number of incidents disclosed by the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority, which make it clear that there is consistent over-running, incidents such as doors falling off trains without being noticed, as well as a number of other questions that ought to be raised on the Floor of the House as rapidly as possible.

Mrs. Taylor: I am aware of my hon. Friend's long-term concern about those issues. I am not sure that

[Mrs. Taylor]

it will be possible to find time for the debate that she requests, but those matters are of concern to many people, especially as we approach the holiday period. She will be aware that Transport questions are next Tuesday.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Will the right hon. Lady tell the House why the Government have allowed a press release to be issued by a Government Department—by a Minister—carrying private advertising and the logos of a private company in colour? Surely that is very nearly approaching sleaze. It ought to be stopped, because it is Government money, not private money. Will she investigate that matter, and ensure that it is stopped and that a statement is issued about it next week?

Mrs. Taylor: I do not know exactly what the right hon. Gentleman is referring to, but I doubt if anything of that sort is unprecedented.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Will my right hon. Friend consider a short statement next week, giving some explanation as to why it should take the Home Office and the Metropolitan police until the end of September to come to a conclusion on the tragic murder of one of their own—Woman Police Constable Yvonne Fletcher? Is it not extraordinary that the conventional view is against the evidence of the senior ballistics expert of the British Army, George Styles, the evidence given by Hugh Thomas, the consultant surgeon in Belfast, and the professional evidence of probably the most distinguished Home Office pathologist this century, Bernard Knight, who was put in charge at Cromwell street? Is that not a matter of some urgency?

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend raised that matter with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on Tuesday. As my right hon. Friend said, the case remains open and the Metropolitan police will of course consider any new evidence. On the delay, it is important that any examination of evidence should be thorough. I do not think that we can find time for a debate on the subject in the near future.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Will the Leader of the House reconsider her decision not to allow us a debate next week on Members of Parliament being able to speak their mind on, for example, devolution, without the threat of expulsion from the parliamentary party? She will have heard what both the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) and the Secretary of State for Wales said yesterday; there is a clear distinction, so they cannot both be right, and there cannot be an innocent explanation for the one who is wrong.

The Leader of the House will remember that the Prime Minister said that Ministers who deceived the House, directly or indirectly, should resign. Is not the proper course to have an early debate, so that the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent and the Secretary of State for Wales can explain their respective positions, and we can judge and take the appropriate action?

Mrs. Taylor: There is no need for any debate or action of the kind suggested. The Prime Minister made it perfectly clear yesterday that hon. Members are entitled to speak their mind.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May we have a debate on the Government's proposals for the long-term disposal of nuclear waste, and in particular the future operations of Nirex?

Mrs. Taylor: I know that my hon. Friend has taken a great interest in that matter over many years. He can make representations to the Ministers involved, but I cannot promise him a debate.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Pursuant to the answer that I received from the Leader of the House regarding the Northern Ireland Grand Committee last Thursday, when she said, in an answer recorded at column 461, that there would be opportunities for questions, may I press again for a meeting of the Committee with a period of questions, bearing in mind the fact that, while I welcome the participation of other hon. Members in Northern Ireland business, there seems to be some syndicating or mental telepathy, as, in the most recent Northern Ireland questions, only one Northern Ireland Member appeared on the list? That makes it impossible for us to deal with constituency matters. Might further consideration therefore be given to a meeting of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee?

Mrs. Taylor: I have no responsibility for the Order Paper, but I recall what the hon. Gentleman said last week, and I will discuss the matter again with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): To identify sleaze in the House, would not the Opposition agree that a debate is needed urgently on early-day motion 164?

[*That this House is shocked that the Leader of the Opposition accepted a gift of £20,000 from David Steene, managing director of the City Mortgage Corporation which specialises in marketing oppressive mortgage deals to vulnerable and unsophisticated people who are judged to be high risks by reputable companies; deplores CMC's high interest rates that are doubled if a single payment is missed in order that increasing debts lead to homes being repossessed to the profit of CMC; is appalled that thousands of CMC's victims are left homeless and in debt; notes that the CMC Victims Group has accused the company of malpractice; and agrees with the Group's call that the Leader of the Opposition should give the £20,000 to the victims of the CMC in order to convince the House that he is opposed to sleaze.*]

The motion gives details of how the Leader of the Opposition accepted a gift of £20,000 from Mr. David Steene, who operates an extraordinary business called the City Mortgage Corporation that specialises in giving mortgages to vulnerable, high-risk people at high rates of interest that are often doubled in the course of the mortgage, in order to gain possession of the houses for Mr. Steene's own profit. The victims of the organisation have described his business practices as atrocious, and accused him of malpractice. Is it right that the Leader of the Opposition should have been elected on the basis of £20,000—money that is highly dubious, if not from an immoral source?

Mrs. Taylor: I can understand why my hon. Friend is concerned about the matter. He can of course raise it with Sir Gordon Downey, and perhaps it would be better dealt with by him than in a debate on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the Leader of the House arrange an urgent debate on the qualifications and criteria for holding the position of Secretary of State in the Government of which she is such a prominent member? It need only be a short debate, because the principal participants would be the Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) and perhaps the hon. Member for Ogmore (Sir R. Powell), who has also had recent occasion to encounter the Secretary of State for Wales, although in a slightly different context.

It might even be useful to the House if the Prime Minister himself were prepared to participate in that short debate, which would help to illuminate the matters so ably identified by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg).

Mrs. Taylor: I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman's question has anything to do with the fact that the Opposition have no shadow Secretary of State for Wales. Perhaps he will find some Welsh connections instead of his Scottish ones. We will take no lectures from a party that not only has no shadow Secretary of State for Wales but no Welsh Members.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Will the Leader of the House use her good offices to arrange for a meeting of the House of Commons Commission next week? This Parliament has been existence for many weeks, and I understand that the Commission has not met. Many hon. Members are aware of several rumbling industrial relations problems relating to the employees of the House. The matter should be urgently addressed by the Commission. That is its business if it meets; if it does not, it is the business of all 659 of us to ensure that proper good industrial relations are maintained.

Mrs. Taylor: The House of Commons Commission has now been established, but the domestic Committees have not yet been set up. I do not know when the next meeting of the Commission will be, but I anticipate that there will be one before the summer recess.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Will the right hon. Lady consider the need for a debate next week on the ability of hon. Members to speak their minds? Does she accept that she quoted the Prime Minister selectively? Yesterday, he said:

"People are perfectly entitled to state their position"—

not their minds—but after only a comma he continued:

"provided, of course, that they do so in accordance with the rules of the parliamentary party."—[*Official Report*, 25 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 837.]

Does she not feel that it is necessary to have a debate on whether the Labour party asserts privileges and rules above those of each and every Member of this House?

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman asked me to reconsider the need for a debate; I do not think that there is a need for a debate.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): May I urge my right hon. Friend to make time for an urgent debate on the law of perjury and its application? Is she aware that in 1995, 193 people were sent to prison for perjury, and that, since 1979, the longest prison sentence for the offence was a mere five years? Does she agree that perjury is very serious, and that there is a case for the Home Secretary to review the appropriate sentence to be meted out to people who knowingly perjure themselves in the courts of this land?

Mrs. Taylor: The whole House will agree with my hon. Friend that perjury is a very serious matter. I will bring his comments to the attention of the Law Officers.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid–Sussex): May I press the right hon. Lady again on the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry)? It is a little more serious than was suggested by the glib way in which she dismissed it. After the point to which my hon. Friend referred, the Prime Minister said:

"I can give my personal assurance that no such threat was made."—[*Official Report*, 25 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 837.]

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) claims that that is not correct, and that the Prime Minister has been misled. Would it not therefore be right that he should come to the House and clarify the situation as a matter of urgency?

Mrs. Taylor: I have nothing to add to what I said, but I remind the hon. Gentleman, who may not know this because he is now on the Back Benches, not on the Front Bench, that the leader of his party wrote to the Prime Minister this morning about this matter, and the Prime Minister confirmed that he had investigated the allegations, was satisfied with the result and that the matter was closed.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): Is my right hon. Friend aware that academic articles produced by Hull university politics department, entitled "Blair's Bastards", listed Labour Members who had voted on the most occasions against the Whip and who presumably had spoken out the most? I was second on that list. However, in 10 years, I have not had a dicky bird said to me by Whips or Ministers to seek to control that. Does that not show that there is a great deal of tolerance within the Labour party?

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend proves that we do not need a debate.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): May I add to the calls for an early debate in Government time to consider the question of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges? Does the Leader of the House agree that it is one of the most important Committees in the House, particularly in the present climate, and that it is absolutely imperative that it commands the greatest respect across the Floor of the House and beyond?

Is the right hon. Lady aware that only three Privy Counsellors have been nominated to the Committee, which, until 1940, was chaired by no less a person than the Prime Minister? Of the 11 Committee members, three are new Labour Members who simply cannot be expected to understand the proceedings and complications of the House after such a short time. Indeed, it would be extremely unfair to expect them to do so.

[Mr. Gerald Howarth]

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac), to whom I gave notice that I would raise the matter, is in a particularly difficult position: not only is she brand new, but she is to sit on a Committee that will preside over the fate of her predecessor, Mr. Michael Brown. That creates a clear conflict of interest. Furthermore, the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), to whom I also spoke before raising the matter this afternoon, was involved with Mr. David Hencke in receiving advance notification, to the benefit of the then Opposition, of the story that was to be run by *The Guardian* about a member of the Conservative party.

I invite the Leader of the House to consider this matter seriously. You, Madam Speaker, made it clear in the previous Parliament how seriously you regard the way in which the House is portrayed to people outside. The House's reputation is at stake; the Select Committee is charged with the task of representing the House to the outside world. I hope that the Leader of the House understands the serious points that I have raised, and will arrange for a debate.

Mrs. Taylor: After that speech, I am not sure that we need a debate, anyway. If the hon. Gentleman wanted to object to the establishment of that Committee, he had an opportunity to do so last evening. He chose not to do so, and the House is therefore entitled to note that he missed that opportunity.

Mr. Howarth: On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. Points of order come after all statements have been made.

Mrs. Taylor: As I said, the hon. Gentleman could have objected last night. If the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges carries out its work quickly, it may be possible to have early debates on those matters in the House. As for the seniority of Committee members, the Committee is well balanced. Indeed, there are now more Privy Counsellors on the Committee than there were in the last Session of Parliament.

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): First, I thank the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) for the courteous and amicable way in which he notified me that he intended to raise this matter.

Will the Leader of the House confirm that if, having been shown documents by that journalist, hon. Members were excluded from Select Committees, we would never have a quorum on any of them? Will she also confirm, and thereby reassure the hon. Gentleman, that I did not seek membership of that Committee, but seem to acquire it as a geriatric endowment? If, as a member of that Committee, I find that I have privy access to any information that is not available to the Committee, I shall certainly inform the Committee of it, and not vote on the ensuing discussion.

Madam Speaker: I shall, of course, allow the Leader of the House to respond, but we are moving a very long way away from next week's business. Questions to the Leader of the House should deal with next week's business. Does the right hon. Lady wish to respond?

Mrs. Taylor *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): Surely one way out of the right hon. Lady's difficulties, which have been illustrated by my right hon. and hon. Friends, would be to arrange a debate on the Representation of the People Act 1949. That would allow us to discuss the effective disfranchisement of a part of two great cities in the United Kingdom, Glasgow and Liverpool, apparently on the authority of the Prime Minister. If the hon. Members concerned turned up in the House, where would they be expected to sit?

Mrs. Taylor: The right hon. Gentleman makes strange suggestions. The fact that an hon. Member is suspended pending investigation does not interfere with his ability to represent constituents.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Several Conservative Members—in particular, the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg)—have called for a debate about hon. Members misleading the House. They wanted a relatively short debate. Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House bear it in mind that the debate would have to be a lot longer than that if we included all the ex-Tory Ministers who misled the House?

I am thinking of the ex-Home Secretary, who finished up in court nine times—a recidivist—because he misled the House so often. I am thinking of the previous Prime Minister, who misled the House when he said that his Government would get rid of the beef ban after Florence last November, and failed. I am thinking of all the rest of them who have been jumping up and down, who lined their pockets with consultancies. We could have a very long debate about that matter, and I encourage them all to turn up for it, so that we can examine all their records.

Mrs. Taylor: I have listened carefully to what my hon. Friend says. I have a difficulty, because, if I had to provide time for a debate of the length that he requests, I might not be able, even in the next few weeks, to announce when the summer recess will be.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): Bearing in mind the comment by the Prime Minister to the House yesterday that hon. Members have freedom of speech, provided that it is within the rules of their parliamentary party; in the light of the standing order endorsed by the parliamentary Labour party before the last election that guaranteed hon. Members freedom of speech; in the light of the comments made by the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) in a debate in the House about his concerns that the Secretary of State for Wales had been reported as saying that disciplinary proceedings would be taken against any Member who spoke against devolution; and in the light of the admonition given by the Secretary of State for Wales to the right hon. Member for Swansea, West from the Dispatch Box at the end of that debate, does the right hon. Lady agree that it is urgent for us to have a debate in the House, not only on freedom of speech

for Members, but on the use of the Dispatch Box and statements by Ministers to indulge in parliamentary Labour party business?

Mrs. Taylor: That takes the prize for the cheek of the day. I do not believe that Labour Members are trying to discuss internal affairs at the Dispatch Box or anywhere else. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it clear that there is no need for a debate, and I have nothing further to add.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Can the right hon. Lady, on reflection, confirm that the Prime Minister will make a statement to the House next week explaining—not least for the benefit of new Members such as myself—how it was possible for him to investigate the dispute between the Secretary of State for Wales and the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith), without having spoken to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent?

Mrs. Taylor: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister explained that hon. Members are free to speak their minds. That is perfectly straightforward.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I thank the right hon. Lady for her kind opening words.

In view of the fact that Monday's and Tuesday's business is important but not desperately urgent, will she bear it in mind that it is desperately urgent for us to clarify a matter of extreme constitutional importance? Can we therefore arrange, at the very least, for the Secretary of State for Wales to give a personal statement?

The fact is that yesterday the Prime Minister said, in good faith, that he believed that no one had told an untruth. However, last night the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith)—whose integrity is not in dispute—made it quite plain that he did not agree with that position. The situation must be clarified. Will the right hon. Lady allow that to occur?

Mrs. Taylor: I repeat my welcome to the hon. Gentleman. However, I am sorry that, at his first appearance at the Dispatch Box for business questions, I cannot agree with one word he said. There are no constitutional implications, and there is no need for a personal statement. For the convenience of Opposition Front-Bench Members, I shall ensure that they receive a copy of the letter that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister sent to the Leader of the Opposition today.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Thank you. We shall now move on.

Points of Order

4.5 pm

Hon. Members: On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. I instruct hon. Members that they must make points of order and not points of frustration. Several hon. Members who were not called during business questions are seeking to catch my eye. I stress that they must raise proper points of order.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I promise you that I am not one whit frustrated, and I seek your guidance. If it were true that an hon. Member had been threatened with being prevented from speaking his mind and threatened with expulsion from the parliamentary party, would such a threat—if made—constitute a contempt of Parliament?

Madam Speaker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman asks a hypothetical question. If he touches upon a matter of privilege, he must write to me: I shall not have an exchange across the Floor of the House on that matter. He is a long-standing Member of Parliament, so he will know that I do not deal in hypothetical answers.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The Leader of the House asked why I did not object to the formation of the Standards and Privileges Committee last night. I did not object because the motion was not debatable. *[Interruption.]*

Hon. Members: This is not a point of order.

Madam Speaker: Order. I do not need any help.

A point of order must raise a matter with which I can deal. The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) raises a point of frustration. He is attempting to answer the Leader of the House, and he cannot do that through me, as Speaker. He must raise a point of order with which I can deal. I shall listen to his point of order if it concerns me.

Mr. Howarth: My point of order is quite simple, Madam Speaker. Will you confirm to the House that a motion such as that moved last night is simply not debatable? If an objection had been registered, the Committee could not have been formed until some time in the future, thereby delaying the matter.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct—and he has now put a correct point of order to me. He could have objected to the motion last night. That would have delayed the establishment of the Committee, and the matter would have come before the House again. The hon. Gentleman could have objected if he had wished to do so, but, out of kindness to the House, he did not.

Mr. Simon Burns (Chelmsford, West): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The concept of internal exile is constitutionally very vague and almost unknown. Is it in order for you to discover whether the hon. Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Sarwar)—who has not, to the best of my knowledge, been seen in the precincts of Westminster, or certainly in the Chamber, since shortly

[Mr. Simon Burns]

after the election—and the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing), who has not been seen in the Chamber for a week, have been told by the Government Whips Office that they must not come to the House? If that is so, they would not be able to represent the interests of their constituents.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Let me deal with one point of order at a time. That is not a matter for me.

Mr. Burns: Why?

Madam Speaker: I am not concerned with the internal matters of any political party. As far as I am concerned, the matter has been referred to Sir Gordon Downey, who, in turn, will no doubt inform the appropriate Committee. I am concerned with that process, and not with the internal matters of any political party.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid–Sussex): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You are the guardian of the rights of Parliament, and we poor, miserable, downtrodden Back Benchers look to you to act in just that way.

The Leader of the House says that the Prime Minister is personally satisfied with the explanation that he has been offered by the Secretary of State for Wales. The House, however, and particularly the Opposition, are not satisfied. Who is supreme in this matter—the House or the Prime Minister? May I ask you, Madam Speaker, to clarify the point? Will you ask the Prime Minister to come to the House to re-clarify the situation, where he may have inadvertently not quite got his answer right yesterday?

Madam Speaker: I have no authority, as the hon. Gentleman knows, to demand that any Member or Minister come to the House to make a statement. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to pursue the matter further to secure a debate, he must do so through the usual channels.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It is a question of the accuracy of the *Official Report*. In the context of the questioning of the Prime Minister yesterday during Prime Minister's Question Time by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Leader of the Opposition, he raised matters concerning the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith).

The Prime Minister said:

"I have just made it clear that I investigated the matter this morning. There is no truth in these allegations."—[*Official Report*, 25 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 838.]

Subsequently, the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent has denied that position. Is it possible to have the *Official Report* corrected?

Madam Speaker: If the hon. Member is seeking to amend in any way the *Official Report*, he must see the right hon. Gentleman who made the statement—the Prime Minister—along with the Editor of *Hansard*.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Would you confirm that it is not only the duty but the right of Members of Parliament to enter any part of this Parliament on any occasion, and to express their view in any way that they are so responsible for? Would you confirm also, from your long experience, that it is exceedingly difficult to keep members of the Labour party quiet for any length of time?

Madam Speaker: All I can say in response to the hon. Lady is, "Well said."

Mr. James Paice (South–East Cambridgeshire): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I am sure that you will agree that items of correspondence between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition are tremendously important to the House, especially when they refer, as in this instance, to events surrounding a Secretary of State, a member of the Government.

In answer to a question earlier, the Leader of the House referred to the Prime Minister's reply, and said that he had carried out a full investigation. I ask you, as Speaker, to ensure that the details of that investigation, as to who was consulted before the Prime Minister responded to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, are tabled and made available to the House.

Madam Speaker: I have no authority to require a right hon. Gentleman or any Member of the House to put before the House any investigations that he has carried out that are of an internal nature, which in this instance they obviously are.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Are you able to confirm that most periods of business questions, both in this Parliament and in the previous one, lasted for very nearly an hour? At least that was the position sometimes. Today, in your discretion, you brought the proceedings to an end at about 4 o'clock or 5 minutes past 4.

As a result, I was unable to catch your eye to raise with the Leader of the House the important question of new age travellers in my constituency. May I ask you, Madam Speaker, that on other occasions Back Benchers who wish to raise constituency matters with the Leader of the House may be given a somewhat longer opportunity to catch your eye?

Madam Speaker: As I thought, the hon. and learned Gentleman has raised a point of frustration, not a point of order. I can tell him and the House as a whole that business questions, on average, last 35 minutes. That is the average since I have been Speaker. I keep a record, and I always have the details with me.

BILL PRESENTED

Ministerial and other Salaries

Mrs. Ann Taylor, supported by Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Dewar, Mr. Secretary Davies and Dr. David Clark, presented a Bill to make provision for the alteration of salaries payable under the Ministerial and other Salaries Act 1975: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 30].

Appropriation (Northern Ireland)

Madam Speaker: I have a short statement to make for the guidance of hon. Members who may wish to take part in the debate. I wish to make it clear that the debate on the order may cover all matters for which all Northern Ireland Departments, as distinct from the Northern Ireland Office, are responsible. As many hon. Members know, police and security are the principal excluded subjects. I hope that that is of some guidance to hon. Members.

4.14 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Paul Murphy): I beg to move,

That the draft Appropriation (No. 2) (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 11th June, be approved.

I welcome the hon. Members for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) and for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) to the Opposition Front Bench. I am sure that they will continue the bipartisan approach that we took on Northern Ireland matters in the previous Parliament.

The draft order, which covers the main estimates for Northern Ireland Departments, authorises spending of almost £4,000 million for the current financial year. Taken together with the sum voted on account in March this year, that brings the total estimates provision for Northern Ireland Departments to almost £7,000 million, which is an increase of just over 4 per cent. on the 1996–97 outturn.

The order also authorises the use of additional receipts to meet an excess vote in 1995–96. The sums sought for individual services are set out in the estimates booklet, which is, as usual, available from the Vote Office. I remind the House that the estimates for the Northern Ireland Office on law and order services are not covered by the order.

I am sure that the House would prefer the draft order to be considered in some form of local Assembly. The Government's overriding objective in Northern Ireland is to achieve progress towards a lasting political settlement that will enable powers to be devolved to local administration. That is why we are anxious to press ahead with multi-party talks, which we believe offer the best chance of securing a comprehensive settlement that addresses and resolves the fundamental concerns of all participants. Despite some horrific recent setbacks, that remains the Government's firm objective. It was the subject of the Prime Minister's statement to the House of Commons yesterday.

Hon. Members will appreciate that the draft order reflects the previous Government's spending allocations. I am pleased to announce that it is possible to reallocate some £4 million for schools this year, and that is reflected in the estimates.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): How much of the extra £4 million will be targeted at social need in schools in badly deprived areas?

Mr. Murphy: The purpose of the £4 million virement is to ensure that teachers are kept in their jobs, and as a consequence that class sizes are kept to a minimum. I am sure that much of that spending will be in areas where social need is obvious. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that matter.

Our priorities are not necessarily the same as those of the previous Government. My party overwhelmingly won the election on a manifesto committed to a reduction in class sizes and health service bureaucracy, and on pledges on the economy and welfare to work. These figures do not necessarily reflect those priorities.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The Minister referred to bureaucracy. What role do Northern Ireland Ministers play in curbing spending, bearing in mind the latest revelation that, according to law, departmental heads—the civil servants—are really in charge?

Mr. Murphy: I note the hon. Gentleman's point. I am sure that when my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, who is responsible for those matters, winds up the debate, he will take it into account.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has—rightly—stated that Departments will be expected to work within the 1997–98 and 1998–99 spending ceilings announced by the former Government. Nevertheless, we shall be reviewing allocations within those limits in the light of our own priorities.

That is why the Government have launched a comprehensive spending review that will focus on the medium term—to the end of this Parliament and beyond. On 11 June, my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced details of our approach to public spending in the medium term and how our comprehensive spending review will be taken forward. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has already announced a comprehensive review of programmes in Northern Ireland. It will be a root-and-branch examination of every area of spending. In her address to the chief executives' forum on 28 May, my right hon. Friend announced that there would be extensive consultation on public expenditure priorities as the review progressed.

I cannot of course speculate on the outcome of the review or the consultations; but they do mark a new and exciting departure from previous practice. We intend to consult widely over the next couple of months—indeed, we have already begun. I shall be inviting all the political parties in Northern Ireland, local authorities, and representatives of the voluntary sector, of business and commerce and of the trade unions, to express their views on spending priorities for Northern Ireland. I believe that to be a step in the right direction, in parallel, I hope, with the talks process.

I intend to highlight the main items in the estimates without going into too much detail, as I am sure that hon. Members will have examined them. I begin with the Department of Agriculture, where there is net provision of some £30 million to fund European Union and national agricultural support measures. The vote also includes moneys for structural improvements and for grants, and funds for farming in special areas. It includes, furthermore, provision for the development of agriculture and the agricultural products industry, for scientific and veterinary services, for farm support, for enhancement of the countryside, and for fisheries and forestry services. The vote also provides resources for the rural development programme and the Rivers Agency.

Hon. Members will also note the provision for the Department of Economic Development. They will be aware that well over £150 million is required for the

[Mr. Murphy]

Industrial Development Board in Northern Ireland, which plays an important part in attracting and supporting industrial development there. In 1996–97, the board supported about 35 inward investment projects offering nearly 5,000 new jobs. Northern Ireland Members will be aware, too, of one of the latest such projects—Seagate in Londonderry. Unfortunately, that same city has undergone the loss of several hundred jobs in the past few days; so the one tends to cancel out the other. It is important, however, to continue to put money into the IDB.

The amount to be provided for the Local Enterprise Development Unit, Northern Ireland's own small business agency, is £31 million. That will allow it to maintain its excellent track record of developing, strengthening and improving the competitiveness of the important small firms sector in Northern Ireland.

There is also £14 million for the Northern Ireland tourist board. It was noticeable during the ceasefire that many more people expressed an interest in going to Northern Ireland. The ending of the ceasefire, and the more recent disorders, have had a marked effect on visitor numbers. They are still pretty healthy, but they could be an awful lot better.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): The Minister seems to be repeating a statement that is regularly made about tourism in Northern Ireland. I am sure that he will agree that the reaction that he is describing is based on a misapprehension, as Northern Ireland continues to be, just as it always has been, the part of the United Kingdom with the lowest crime rate. There is thus no reason why anyone should be discouraged by a fear of crime from going there. It is also quite wrong of the tourist board and others to repeat the canard when they should be tackling tourism more effectively.

Mr. Murphy: I accept that point entirely. My experience over the past few weeks as a Minister with responsibility for Northern Ireland is that the overwhelming percentage of the geography of Northern Ireland is no different from—indeed, it is better than—parts of the Principality that I represent. However, it is of some interest that, if we talk, as we must now, about the money that is voted for the Department of Economic Development, there is also a need this very week and in the weeks ahead to understand that if, throughout the world, pictures of disorder are shown on television, clearly, industrial development is affected.

We hope and pray that the people in Northern Ireland who are responsible for disorder will be made aware that, in many ways, they are damaging the prospects for Northern Ireland's economy. It is a most important factor to take into account. I understand what the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) says, and I believe that all of us wish the Secretary of State well in her endeavours to bring about peace.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): From what the Minister says and because he mentioned United Technologies leaving Londonderry, is he suggesting that, whatever difficulty United Technologies had, last year's rioting in the republican areas of Londonderry, when 22,500 petrol bombs were thrown over the space of a couple of days, in a well-orchestrated and pre-planned attack on the Royal Ulster Constabulary, was the final nail in the coffin of that company?

Mr. Murphy: I should not like to talk about what exactly caused that company's departure, but I am sure that most of us—indeed all of us—would agree with the hon. Gentleman that the rioting certainly did not help.

Nearly £200 million is allocated for the Training and Employment Agency. It provides nearly 15,000 training places under the job skills training programme and nearly 8,000 places for long-term unemployed adults under action for community employment, the community work programme and Enterprise Ulster, developing the skills of work forces in Northern Ireland. I hope that, next week, when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announces his Budget—and undoubtedly he will spend much of his time dealing with the welfare-to-work proposals, which formed an important part of our manifesto—much of the good work that will result will be reflected in Northern Ireland, where it is desperately needed.

The Department of the Environment spends nearly £200 million on roads, transport and ports. Some £220 million will provide assistance to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and to the voluntary housing movement, which means that the housing executive will be able to start some 800 new houses, while housing associations will start more than 1,000 new dwellings in Northern Ireland.

Expenditure on water and sewerage services is estimated at nearly £200 million—at £184 million, to be exact. I am sure that Northern Ireland Members will be aware that much needs to be done in relation to the water and sewerage infrastructure. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the noble Lord Dubs, the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, have examined the matter in detail.

A total of £183 million is for environmental and other services: the Environment and Heritage Service, the Planning Service, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, the Construction Service, the Land Registers of Northern Ireland and, of course, urban regeneration. There is no doubt that everyone associated with Northern Ireland is aware that the money that has been spent over the years on urban regeneration pays dividends. Some £37 million will be made available under the European Union peace and reconciliation programme, of which £28 million will be funded from EU receipts. Additionally, some £44 million goes to the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland.

The Department of Education seeks a total of £1,408 million, which sounds a lot, but is actually a decrease of nearly 2 per cent. on last year's provision. I know that hon. Members from all over Northern Ireland have expressed concern in the past few years about the reduction in the education budget. As they are aware, education is a very high priority for my Government. We believe that we must give high priority to class sizes and maintaining standards in education.

I am also concerned about capital projects. Although we have put millions of pounds into such projects in Northern Ireland, the state of many schools in the Province remains unsatisfactory. I am pleased that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde

(Dr. Godman) highlighted, an extra £4 million has now been made available for schools from another source. Local universities, student support, youth, sport, community and cultural activities are provided for.

At the Department of Health and Social Services, £1,518 million is to be spent on hospitals, community health, personal social services, health and social services trusts, family health services and some other services. There is, of course, extra money for grants to voluntary bodies and so on.

It is a high priority of my Government to reduce bureaucracy in the health service in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere in the United Kingdom. It is also a high priority to reduce waiting lists, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will touch on those matters when he winds up the debate.

Nearly £2,000 million is for social security benefit expenditure, administered by the Social Security Agency. That represents an 8.3 per cent. increase on last year and covers not only the general uprating of benefits from April 1997, but an increase in the number of beneficiaries. I hope that next week my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will refer to that, because it is important to emphasise that the thrust of our policy is to take people off benefit and put them back to work. That applies as much to Northern Ireland as anywhere else in the kingdom.

Finally, I have to mention my own Department, the Department of Finance and Personnel, where some £5.8 million is sought for the community relations programme. In addition, nearly £2 million has been made available through funding from European Union receipts under the peace and reconciliation programme.

I have drawn attention to the main provisions of the estimates. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will reply to any points raised in the debate.

This is a short but important debate. It is important because, in many ways, it is about the other Northern Ireland, the real Northern Ireland. It is not about the horrors that we have witnessed or the sometimes frustrating talks process, vital though that is. It is about jobs, schools and hospitals; it is about the quality of life for 1.5 million people in Northern Ireland, whose needs and aspirations are the same as those of anyone else in the United Kingdom. I hope and pray that we can achieve a settlement that will mean that we can concentrate on the social and economic needs of the people of the Province. I therefore commend the order to the House.

4.32 pm

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): I return the compliments and welcome the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy), to his post at the Northern Ireland Office. He has a very responsible job, and I was interested in the way in which he presented the estimates. As he rightly recognised, we have a new, fresh team. I thank him for the welcome that he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) and me. I must also mention my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Cran). He is now an Opposition Whip and therefore no longer frozen in silence, as was the tradition when we were in government. He will be playing an active role in the proceedings of the House. I recognise the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington), and look forward to hearing him wind up the debate.

The Minister will not be surprised if I keep my remarks fairly brief, partly because, as someone who has just been invited to take on this responsibility, my first task is to listen. I am sure that there will be some interesting contributions, which will enable me to learn a little more about the issues affecting constituents in the Province.

I was interested to hear the Minister's detailed comments on policy. It is important to put it on record that the Northern Ireland economy enjoys its best prospects for generations. We sincerely share the hope that that continues. Unemployment in May was at its lowest for almost 17 years. At 8.4 per cent. of the work force, it is still too high and there were some disturbing announcements this week that the Minister mentioned, but the overall picture is positive.

Conservative policies delivered low inflation, low taxation and low interest rates for Northern Ireland. That framework, together with a flexible labour market and the removal of burdens on business, has ensured that Northern Ireland firms remain competitive in an increasingly competitive global economy. I hope that my experience as a Minister at the Department of Trade and Industry will be of benefit during debates on what the Minister rightly called the real Northern Ireland economy, away from the troubles that have beset the Province.

Manufacturing exports were worth more than £3 billion in 1995–96—an increase of almost one fifth. The Province received more inward investment that year than ever before, with 35 projects, worth £430 million, creating or safeguarding almost 5,000 new jobs.

In one respect, 1995–96 was unique. The IRA ceasefire gave new hope to everyone in Northern Ireland. Figures released recently by the Industrial Development Board show that inward investment and business confidence were dealt a clear blow by the IRA's return to violence. I endorse the Minister's comments about the consideration that those who threaten or carry out violence must give to the disturbance that they cause to the economic prospects of the citizens of the Province. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition confirmed yesterday that we are anxious to continue the bipartisan approach to the peace process, provided that the Government's actions continue to be in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland. I echo those comments.

The paramilitary ceasefires enabled the previous Government to reduce spending on law and order by almost £300 million between 1995–96 and 1998–99, according to the estimates that we set out. Those funds have been released and earmarked for improving the quality of life for the people of Northern Ireland. That should be taken carefully into account if the problems increase, because that reallocation of resources cannot be sustained unless the IRA lays down its weapons once more.

The Opposition will work closely with the Government to bring about a new ceasefire, but the onus remains firmly on the IRA. The Prime Minister made that clear yesterday.

I should like clarification on some general points. I listened carefully to the Minister. Away from the troubles, there may be less inter-party agreement on how to keep the Northern Ireland economy vibrant. I do not disagree about the need to bring down class sizes. I also concur with some of the Minister's other comments, but we must be clear about some of the principles that the

[Mr. Ian Taylor]

Conservative Government set in train. Northern Ireland benefits from the current fiscal arrangements by £3 billion a year. In 1995–96, public spending per capita was almost £1,400 higher in Northern Ireland than in England. Will the Minister confirm that he has no plans to change those arrangements and that the more disadvantaged areas of the United Kingdom, particularly those in the Province, will continue to receive extra financial support from the Exchequer?

The Prime Minister yesterday confirmed his wish to devolve power to Northern Ireland when circumstances permit. Will the Minister confirm that the Government have no plans to introduce tax-raising powers for a devolved Assembly?

The private finance initiative has much to offer the taxpayer. The Northern Ireland Office has signed a small number of deals, worth about £4 million. It is imperative that more use is made of the PFI in Northern Ireland. It seems to have been endorsed by the Labour Government, but the disruption of the team that was running it has led to a sense of drift. I should like an assurance from the Minister that the removal of people who have tried to get the PFI going and the various reviews that are taking place will not disadvantage the people of Northern Ireland by causing delays in the projects that the PFI could assist. What action is being taken to ensure that the PFI benefits the Province?

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has introduced a completely new set of assumptions about growth, unemployment and other key economic factors. We believe those assumptions generally to be over-cautious. Can the Minister explain their effect on the services provided to the people of Northern Ireland and the higher taxes that they and the rest of us may be expected to pay?

I am concerned when I hear about root-and-branch reviews of every aspect of public expenditure. The Government seem to have come in on a wave of enthusiasm for reviews. I hope that the Province is not burdened by too many reviews, as they may well be a substitute for effective action.

Will the Minister assure me that Northern Ireland will not be penalised by the rigid approach of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, that there should be no transfers between headings of expenditure and, in the broader Budget sense, no virements between Departments, even if resources that are freed up in one section of expenditure could be beneficial to another? I understand the restraint of using the Red Book projections on public expenditure for the current year and the forward year, but what happens within those caps? Are there movements between headings, and will that affect the estimates that have been laid before the House today?

Those points aside, I am pleased to offer the Opposition's support for the order. We shall certainly not seek to divide the House, and I assure hon. Members that I shall be listening extremely carefully to the rest of the debate.

4.41 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): The question by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) about reviews was rather rich coming from him. Many Scottish Tories fervently wish that the Conservative Government had assessed the likely impact of imposing the poll tax in Scotland. Had that Government done so, the Tories might still have had some Scottish representatives in the House.

I shall be brief, as hon. Members representing Northern Ireland constituencies wish to speak. The hon. Member for Esher and Walton was right to say that the order relates to everyday matters. However, as *The Irish Times* pointed out a couple of days ago, we still face

"the pernicious threat of further IRA violence."

As that editorial pointed out,

"Drumcree looms on Sunday week".

I begin by asking my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about funding. I start with a question about the new passenger ferry service link to Campbeltown and the Mull of Kintyre. As he knows, living on the Clyde, the service has long been attractive to the people of Campbeltown, Carradale, Tarbert and elsewhere. It could help to develop a useful tourist link between the west highlands, particularly the Mull of Kintyre, and the beautiful Province of Northern Ireland.

I was deeply unhappy that the previous Administration rejected—I thought in a squalid way—the use of a Caledonian MacBrayne passenger vessel for such a service, but that is in the past and that Government are now in internal exile. How much has the Northern Ireland Office spent on the project? Are there any forecasts in terms of the number of jobs that are likely to be created in Northern Ireland and Scotland, and what is the assessment of likely passenger volume on the ferry service?

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton mentioned the proposed Assembly. How will its acceptability be assessed? Will it be a costly exercise? In Scotland, we are undergoing a similar process, which will cost some money. How much thought has been given to that? Let me say in passing that I shall be delighted if the anachronistic first-past-the-post system is rejected in favour of a more democratic system.

Although I did not come here to make my hon. Friend the Minister work, I refer to the second report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, entitled, "Underachievement in Northern Ireland Secondary Schools". For about three months, I was a member of the Select Committee. I am concerned about the funds that are directed, by way of targeting social need, to children who live in socially and economically deprived areas. As a Scots Member with a keen and deep interest in Northern Ireland matters, I do not consider that the Department of Education has a very good record in that respect and I say that with some regret.

The report was published just before Parliament was dissolved. Paragraph ii on page xxvi is entitled "School funding and social disadvantage". It states:

"It is quite clear that the figure of five per cent (for Targeting Social Need) is simply based on previous expenditure. TSN funding is money that would have been spent on analogous education projects, but with a new name. The five per cent figure does not seem to have been arrived at by a process which recognised TSN as a priority."

That is the key sentence. I hope that my hon. Friend will—dare I use the word—review and analyse the targeting of social need policy as matters seem to have gone badly awry.

The paragraph continues:

"DENI should initiate debate and consult widely about the appropriate amount of the schools' budget to allocate to this major policy."

I hope that my hon. Friend will examine those matters closely. As I am one of the authors of the report, I should refrain from saying that it is a fine piece of work—however, it is.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that at times other areas have been disadvantaged by hidden deprivation? As some children and not others receive funds for school meals, school budgets receive different amounts, and that affects the income available to schools in order to supply the required standard of education.

Dr. Godman: That was a fine intervention. I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have to root out the disadvantage and inequality that are inflicted on many people of all ages in their everyday lives.

I am concerned by the way in which money is directed towards schools in Northern Ireland. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will not disagree that too much money has gone to fee-paying schools. However, we shall have the opportunity to discuss that on another occasion.

I said that I would be brief and I shall try to keep that promise. I now refer to support for the voluntary sector. I was delighted that the Secretary of State addressed the annual general meeting of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action. I am proud to say that I am closely associated with that organisation, which does remarkably good work in all Northern Ireland constituencies. I would impress on my hon. Friend the Minister—if he needs such heavy-handed impression—not to overlook the legitimate demands of voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland, which do such splendid work in both communities and help to bring them together. I remind the Minister, although he probably does not need it, that he and I, with other hon. Members, met representatives of Playboard yesterday. That organisation does fine work and I ask the Minister to consider any entreaties from Playboard representatives with the sympathy that they deserve.

My final point is one that is also close to my heart. What sums have been earmarked to provide assistance to fire-bombed churches and Orange halls that have recently been the targets of thugs? On that issue, does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that the estimable Canon Sean Connolly should be warmly complimented for his decision to suspend Saturday evening masses in Harryville? That is a magnanimous gesture and I hope that the representatives of the Orange Order and of the Garvaghy road residents association take a leaf out of that estimable man's book. He has set a fine example for others to follow.

I have mentioned the need to direct money more effectively to those in need, by targeting social need policy. I have also mentioned the need to help the voluntary sector and those who have suffered damage at the hands of vicious thugs. I hope for responsible and sympathetic answers on those issues from my hon. Friend the Minister when he winds up.

4.51 pm

Mr. Clifford Forsythe (South Antrim): I, too, welcome the Minister of State and the Under-Secretary to the Front Bench. I also welcome the hon. Members for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) and for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Cran) to their new responsibilities. I have been interested to hear the comments from the Minister, the shadow Minister and our Scottish cousin, the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman).

I remind the House that this is the only opportunity that Members from Northern Ireland have to raise matters that concern their constituencies. Madam Speaker has instructed the House that we are not allowed to discuss certain issues, so, although I am sorely tempted, I will not do so.

We have a new Labour Government and, perhaps, a new broom. My colleagues and I will be interested to see what is done by those who, until a short time ago, sat on the Opposition Benches. They made many comments about Northern Ireland issues and gave us the impression that they would do all sorts of things when they entered government. I will mention some of those issues today and we will watch to see whether some of the promises made are kept.

We are already a little nervous, because the new Government will stick to the same budgets, but we will be interested to see whether the budgets will be redistributed. We have commented on that in the past and we will do so in the future. I hope that I am allowed to mention the ferries, which will bring tourists back and forth. They will be a big advantage for both Northern Ireland and Scotland.

I caution all hon. Members about proportional representation. Its effect is that every person who stands in an election becomes the enemy of his or her party colleagues. The system creates great dissension among party members in a constituency. People should consider carefully before introducing that system, democratic as it may seem. It is a disaster for party discipline.

The Minister of State mentioned water and sewerage. I remind him that one of the largest polluters in Northern Ireland is the Department of the Environment. We have a lot of pollution in Northern Ireland and we have fought continually to solve that problem. It is unfortunate that the poacher and the gamekeeper wear the same clothes and are, in fact, the same person. Until that is sorted out, the pollution problem in Northern Ireland will not be solved.

I also wish to raise the issue of the number of road safety officers in Northern Ireland. Sadly, we have the worst road safety record in the United Kingdom. I had good support on the matter from members of the Government when they were in opposition. It is proposed that the number of road safety officers is to be reduced from 13 to 11, but I look forward to hearing that the number will be maintained at 13.

The Under-Secretary may recall serving on several Committees with me when road safety was mentioned. I look forward to his comments when he winds up. I hope that he will forgive me if I mention a route in my constituency—the A6 Moneynick road which runs from Belfast to Londonderry through Toome Bridge. It must be one of the most dangerous roads in Northern Ireland. When the Government consider the budgets, they should include the roads budget and give the go-ahead for the Toome bypass. The road runs through farming country and cars that are going very fast use the side roads. That means a lot of accidents and deterioration of the roads, which is costing money.

[Mr. Clifford Forsythe]

I am sure that Ministers will remember that I have raised the issue of quangos in the House before, because it is a favourite subject of mine. As Ministers responsible for Northern Ireland, they will soon experience Northern Ireland quangos. I would be interested to hear what they mean to do about the quangos. When their hon. Friends from Wales and Scotland were in opposition, they supported Members from Northern Ireland on the subject of quangos which, as I think they will remember, were described as unrepresentative and undemocratic; they are certainly unelected.

The composition of the Northern Ireland quangos gives one a fair idea of how unrepresentative they are. I know that many people on those quangos do much good work, and that they mean well—but, sadly, the quangos are not democratic. They operate according to the will and pleasure of the Minister, but perhaps he will change some of that now. Perhaps we shall hear something about it later.

Another bone of contention for Northern Ireland Members—I am no exception—is planning. Through a constituent, I received an assurance from a planner that, if a certain large factory in my constituency sought planning permission, it would not be allowed to expand further. Wherever the pressure came from, it is my understanding that that factory has now been given temporary permission for an extension.

What happens when a Department takes enforcement action, as happened recently in my constituency? Enforcement action was taken against an unauthorised carrier, yet the commissioner told the planning service that, because the documents that had been filled in were wrong, he could take no action, and he dismissed the case.

There are other planning issues, too. A housing estate had outline planning permission showing a residents' path, which had been there a long time; yet that had mysteriously been forgotten by the planners, and planning permission over the route of the path was being given. It is a disputed path, but that is the area that could be used.

Unfortunately, there are two planning services in my constituency, one at each end—one in Belfast and one in Ballymena. The decisions taken by the different officers on the same type of application are different. There are supposed to be guidelines, yet different decisions are taken.

This morning, I had to make a quick investigation concerning a mobile telephone mast which was apparently about to be erected in the middle of a housing estate. When I inquired where the permission had come from, I was told that the mast was permitted development under a certain article of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

I tried to read that article, and it was very obscure—although perhaps that impression is my fault rather than that of the draftsman. None the less, nowhere in it could I find anything that would cover that aspect of planning. I am still investigating. I do not ask the Under-Secretary to respond on such detailed matters now, but I may be in touch with his colleague in another place at another stage.

I could, but I shall not, name dozens of small applications which, while all that I have described has been going on, have been vigorously pursued by the Department—so much so that people have arrived on doorsteps very early in the morning to say that, unfortunately, they oppose this or that planning application. I like to think that the "new broom" will consider such matters carefully, and perhaps do something about them.

Perhaps, in passing, the Minister would tell me what legislation governs the opening of the road for gas and cable. I could probably speak for much longer, but I know that my right hon. and hon. Friends want to contribute. *[Interruption.]* I shall continue a little longer.

Last Friday, the House debated the Child Support Agency. For various reasons, I could not be here then, but I would like to refer to the agency now, in the context of Northern Ireland. The office in Belfast covers not only Northern Ireland but the rest of the United Kingdom, and I read with great interest the account of the debate. I thought that there were some questions that had not been answered; indeed, most of the questions were not even asked.

The agency is called the Child Support Agency, yet when we debate it we talk about finances and all sorts of other things. Has it made the children any better off? Decisions on maintenance were taken away from the courts because the courts apparently could not deal with them, and gave the wrong vibrations. People could get away with paying very little.

Are the relationships between former husbands and wives, or other couples, any better now than when maintenance was a matter for the court? Are absent parents, whether male or female, any better at paying? The whole House agreed on the CSA—there were no dissenters—yet now we seem to be concentrating on whether the Exchequer is saving money and whether people are being pursued.

Even with what seem to be black and white, cut and dried cases, the CSA does not seem able to operate the necessary sanctions. That is sad. The idea of a Child Support Agency was correct, yet we are failing to do what we were supposed to do—ensure that parents looked after their children, that fathers and mothers accepted their responsibilities. If that is not happening, that, rather than many of the other things that have been suggested, is what should be investigated.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Does my hon. Friend accept that there is a degree of frustration about what happens? Although the parent Act was passed by the House and deals with all of us, whether we are in England, Wales or Northern Ireland, when I have written to the Secretary of State for Social Security, sending a copy to the Northern Ireland Minister responsible, instead of the matter being dealt with in terms of legal reforms in the House, my letter has been sent back with the message that my question has been transferred to Northern Ireland. Surely the main Act was an Act of the House, affecting us all, and questions should be dealt with here.

Mr. Forsythe: I agree. Unfortunately, as I have found in many Standing Committees on which I have served, Northern Ireland is often not included in Bills. It is always explained to me in minute detail why that is, and that an order will be made at a later stage, but it would be much better if such matters were dealt with in the House by Ministers here. That is no reflection on the Ministers now in situ.

I cannot understand why a fixed amount is not set for each child, or why the Inland Revenue cannot be used to deal with self-employed absent parents. Some of my colleagues on the Select Committee on Social Security were of that opinion, although some are now slipping away from it. Changes must be made to the CSA so that it carries out its proper function. I congratulate the staff of the CSA on their work. They are carrying out our instructions, and my complaints are not about them, but about the legislation—I wish to make that clear.

On social security, I am aware that many applicants for disability living allowance are unhappy. I know that family doctors were in a difficult position when signing forms and making applications for DLA, and the new system was brought in to counter that. However, so many people have complained about the system that there must be some grain of truth in the allegations. There have been complaints about the attitude of those carrying out the medical examinations of not only new applicants but recalls. People have been crying after their examination, and many who have visited me are unhappy. That does not apply to everyone, of course—there are hundreds of cases of which I know nothing. However, if we have a number of complaints, they must be looked at.

The most surprising thing that I have discovered is that there have been complaints about the tribunals for those who have been turned down for DLA. People have complained to me about the attitude and conduct of some members of the tribunal, so much so that I have arranged to meet the president of the tribunals at a future date. It alarms me that people making appeals feel that they cannot put their case forward properly because of the attitude of those on the other side of the desk. This is not a matter for which the new Government have responsibility, but I wish to alert the Minister and the Under-Secretary to it. In addition, I have received many complaints about the jobseeker's allowance—which I need not go into—for various reasons.

The Under-Secretary may remember that I have previously raised the matter of charges at hospital car parks. I know why those charges were introduced: people were parking their car at certain hospitals, getting on the bus and coming back to pick up their car at night. But now the private finance initiative has been introduced at the Royal Victoria hospital, I understand that not only visitors but staff must pay for the car park. Does the Minister consider that to be a pay cut? Nurses are receiving the same salary, but now have to pay for car parking.

I wish to refer to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the annual complaint that is made about bad neighbours. I am sure that all hon. Members could tell me about bad neighbours, as we all have problems in our constituencies. What bothers me is that there seems to be no legislation on the matter. There have been suggestions and attempts to introduce legislation to deal with people who are not conducting themselves properly, and some whose behaviour is worse than that. In certain areas, drugs are dispensed in houses owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and we are unable to do anything about that.

I am not criticising the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, but it is unfortunate that its officers simply give such bad neighbours a transfer. That is not the solution, as it only brings in other people who cause the same trouble and who will be transferred again later. Unfortunately, people who were told that it was a good thing to buy their home, and received a reduction in price, are still suffering bad neighbour problems from Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants, and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive seems unable to do anything about it. I wish to raise that matter with the new team on the Government Front Bench.

I wish to refer to a Northern Ireland Housing Executive case involving two women. One owned her own home, and the other was a tenant of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The woman who owned her home lived in an upstairs apartment, while the other woman lived downstairs. There was a problem with the flue and, as a result, the woman upstairs had her living room destroyed by smoke. The story was that the people who previously lived in the downstairs flat knew not to use the flue, but the new tenant used it. I received a complaint that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's insurance company—rather than the Northern Ireland Housing Executive itself—decided on the damages to be paid. One can argue the case either way, but we know that insurance companies tend to try to cut their losses. If such a situation happens again, what will be the position of the person who is not to blame? I hope that the Under-Secretary will reply on that point—I will even take a letter from him.

5.18 pm

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): I rise for the first time to deliver a speech in the House of Commons. This is a special occasion for me, as I am the first elected Member for the new constituency of West Tyrone or, as some on the mainland like to call it, Tyrone, West. Recently, I thought that any possibility of my being elected to this House—despite my involvement in politics for 30 years—was remote. However, when the boundary commission created an additional seat in Northern Ireland—and that seat took in the area in which I live—that possibility became real.

Evidently West Tyrone was expected to be a nationalist seat, as the electorate are predominantly nationalist. There are two nationalists to every Protestant or Unionist. Due to the division between Sinn Fein and the Social Democratic and Labour party, the full Unionist support in the constituency, and the addition of a number of Roman Catholic votes, I was elected with a majority of 1,161. Hon. Members will not be surprised to learn that I fully support the first-past-the-post voting system.

I was delighted to be elected, but at the count three constituencies were counted together and a Mr. McGuinness—a prominent member of Sinn Fein—was elected for Mid-Ulster and got all the publicity. It was as if Sinn Fein had won the election—I was hardly mentioned. Is it not strange that we live in an age when our party, which won the election, hardly gets mentioned and a party that wins two seats gets all the publicity? That shows how much is gained by supporting terrorists and how much the media are determined to report their every word and action. That is a sad day for democracy in the United Kingdom.

I am proud to represent all the people of West Tyrone, irrespective of their religion or political affiliation. Having lived in the area all my life, I believe that the vast majority of them are decent, honest and hard working and I have a great affection for them.

The new constituency is made up of the district council areas of Omagh and Strabane. Sixty per cent. of the area was incorporated in the previous constituency of

[Mr. William Thompson]

Mid-Ulster, then represented by the Rev. William McCrea, while the rest—the Strabane area—was in the Foyle constituency and was represented by the leader of the SDLP, the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume). I pay tribute to Rev. McCrea for his commitment and dedication to the constituency for the 13 years he represented the area and I wish him well in his future years. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Foyle, who made every effort when he represented the northern part of my constituency to bring employment to the area—with considerable success. It will be difficult for me to emulate that success.

West Tyrone is largely a rural constituency of gentle rolling hills, glens, forests, loughs and rivers revered by fishermen. Omagh is the largest town in the constituency and the county town of Tyrone. Strabane is the next largest town. Farming is the predominant industry and has been badly affected by the beef crisis. A number of large to medium-sized industries exist in the area, giving substantial employment, but unemployment is still excessively high, with the May average figure showing 15 per cent. male unemployment and 5.7 per cent. female employment, as against the United Kingdom average of 7.7 per cent. and 3.1 per cent. respectively. The lower female figure is due to the fact that much of the main industry in the constituency is in the manufacture of textiles, which obviously gives higher female employment. More than one quarter of the unemployed have been out of work for more than five years, which is very worrying.

Inward investment is obviously needed in the constituency. It is, therefore, a high priority and I shall certainly do all I can, with the various employment and inward investment agencies, to bring more employment to the area.

The north-west of Northern Ireland has benefited greatly from the development of computer-based industries, particularly Seagate, which has just announced a big expansion programme. It is hoped that that expansion will have a knock-on effect in my constituency. Given the skills that are available, more inward investment of that sort would be very welcome indeed.

Tourism is another important industry in my constituency. Two of the major attractions are the Ulster-American folk park and the Ulster history park. The former traces the history of the mainly Protestant Scots-Irish emigration to America in the 18th century and the emigrants' unique contribution to the war of independence and the American constitution, boasting ancestral connections with at least 13 Presidents. The park also traces the later emigration of the Irish as a result of the Irish famine, with the settlements in New York, Boston and other American cities. The park contains unique collections of buildings, artefacts and archival materials of the period and has a fine library, which constitutes the only emigration museum of its kind in Ireland. It contains many records detailing the passenger lists of many of the ships that sailed for America and it is an invaluable source of information for students and historians alike.

Under the proposed Museums (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which will be coming up for debate in the House soon, the folk park is to be transferred from the existing trustees to a new board of trustees of the national museums of Northern Ireland—yet another quango—where it will be merged with the Ulster museum and the Ulster folk and transport museum in the Greater Belfast area. Those two museums are in the east of the Province and it is to be hoped that the Ulster folk park will not be disadvantaged by its geographical location in the rural area of Tyrone, but will continue to receive adequate funds to expand and develop. We consider that that is important because we know that there are always pressures in Belfast and outside to get the most money. Sometimes, we in the west are regarded as far distant from the main city. We hope that we will get our fair share of the finances for our park to continue.

The Ulster history park traces the history of Ulster from the time of the first people to arrive through to the 17th century AD. Examples are to be seen of the simple huts, covered with animal skins or possibly tree bark, used by our early ancestors, the introduction of pottery, farming and events leading to the settled way of life. Examples of the different working tools and utensils through the ages are shown, with various tombs used to bury the dead and, no doubt, the various implements that the Irish have used to fight among themselves for the past many hundreds of years. The two parks complement each other, therefore, and attract a considerable number of visitors, and they contribute significantly to the local economy.

My constituency has had its fair share of terrorism in the past 20 years. Many good men, men of the British Army, the Ulster Defence Regiment, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the police reserve have lost their lives through the bomb and the bullet. My area has suffered severely. The principal of the local school was murdered—blown up by an IRA bomb. A schoolmaster in the adjoining village was brutally murdered on his way home from school, and there were many others who chose to join the security forces and serve the community out of their loyalty.

Those people were especially vulnerable because of their part-time jobs. They made the supreme sacrifice, and I salute their memory. That makes us more determined never to give in to terrorism and to ensure that terrorism will not succeed in Northern Ireland. As an elected representative, I have attended the funerals and shared the grief of the loved ones, but I felt powerless to do anything about it.

We, the loyal citizens of Ulster, looked to successive British Governments to deal with terrorism and defeat it; we heard wonderful words, telling us that they would never give in to terrorism, but those words were not met with action. To buy off the terrorists, the Anglo-Irish Agreement, to which we still say no, was imposed on us, giving a foreign power considerable influence in the affairs of our part of the United Kingdom; we resent that.

Again, the Downing street declaration was produced, and the framework document, with its plan to incorporate us gradually into an Irish republic, still hangs over our heads. All those concessions to terrorists have not placated but encouraged them: they believe that the British Government want to leave Northern Ireland and that keeping up the pressure will eventually persuade them to do so. I, along with many loyal people in Ulster, have felt let down and betrayed by successive British Governments.

Sinn Fein even wants to restrict our freedom to display our identity and culture by stopping our parades and church services. How can peace come to Ulster, as we all want? It can come only when the results of the ballot box are acknowledged, terrorism from whatever source is utterly defeated and democracy is again restored to our Province.

We are dealing in particular this afternoon with the finances of Northern Ireland. I was for a short time the Chairman of the Finance Committee of the Assembly of 1982–84. I seek a clarification that the security budget is now separate from the main budget for Northern Ireland. The security budget used to be part of the Northern Ireland Office expenditure.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman should resume his seat for a moment. I am extremely sorry to have to interrupt his maiden speech. I have allowed him considerable latitude, but he will have heard Madam Speaker say that police and security matters are expressly excluded from the compass of this debate. I have made every allowance for the fact that he has been making his maiden speech, but I really must ask him not to pursue security or police matters in the remainder of his remarks.

Mr. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I had no intention of discussing the police or security budget; I was discussing the relationship of that budget with the one that we are debating. That budget was previously kept separate from the Northern Ireland Office and was not cash-limited; we were told that when we had peace in Northern Ireland, part of it was transferred to the Department and we benefited in some way from it, but now, as there is no longer peace, that money has been taken away. We need clarification on that.

Another important issue in Northern Ireland is farming. The farmers have great need of help, especially because of the devaluation of the green pound. Can the Department produce more money to help the farmers? In the past, there was a system of virement, whereby Departments that did not spend all their money, particularly those dealing with inward investment, could transfer their savings to others so that the whole budget could be spent. Will that continue?

5.34 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) on a tremendously confident and, if I may say so, competent speech. I am always greatly impressed by the passion with which Northern Ireland Members speak and the love that they have for their constituencies and the Province that they represent. The hon. Gentleman mentioned that he is here by virtue of the creation of a new seat in Northern Ireland. I am familiar with such feelings, because mine is also a new seat, although in a different part of the country—Gloucestershire.

I hope that Northern Ireland Members will forgive me for intruding, as an English Member, on the debate. There is no reason why people should know this, but I made my maiden speech on the subject of Scottish devolution simply because, although I am not Scottish or from Northern Ireland, I have a great passion for the United Kingdom.

I congratulate Ministers and shadow Ministers on their appointments to the Front Benches. There are many other issues that concern Northern Ireland, but the defeat of the IRA and all violence in the Province must be the first priority. I recognise the need for regeneration and I should like to mention a few aspects that could help the process; they may be novel ideas, but they deserve a mention.

Some time ago, we witnessed the advent of mixed schools in Northern Ireland that children from all traditions could attend. What provision is there for the continuation and encouragement of that process? Local democracy was mentioned earlier; I urge caution on moving towards proportional representation, but I want more specifically to ask what plans are in hand for the strengthening of local democracy—giving more powers to local government—in Northern Ireland to give people elected to councils something worthwhile to do.

On a recent visit to Northern Ireland, I observed that there was a good set-up for local government but that the elected representatives had little responsibility. I do not mean to be unkind—I am sure that Northern Ireland Members know what I mean. I am aware that there is a difficulty, in that some of the councillors elected in Belfast, for instance, are members of Sinn Fein, but we must consider what can be done about the situation. More peace might come to the Province if local people are able to have more power and control over what happens there.

Has an expanded enterprise zone for Belfast been considered, with more inducements for inward investment and companies perhaps paying less tax as an encouragement for them to come there in the first place, as an attempt to regenerate the Province?

Finally, on the peace process, I urge that no time or finance be wasted on going down roads that have been shown to have failed in the past. We cannot expect much good will from the men of violence; we should not waste too much time seeking it.

5.39 pm

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): I want to raise with the Minister the finance that is allocated to the various Departments in Northern Ireland. While no one disagrees with trying to achieve value for money, such is the stringency within Departments that the instructions that go down the line from, for example, the Department of Education to the education and library boards and to individual schools cause a great deal of waste and misdirected effort. I shall illustrate that by dealing with the provision of school meals in small rural primary schools.

In my constituency, where the community has suffered greatly over the years at the hands of terrorists, there have been extraneous pressures on society. It has been exceedingly difficult to maintain many of our small rural primary schools. There is a proposal to close 10 school kitchens in the part of the western board that is in my constituency and three in the part of the southern board that is in my constituency. One might imagine that that would release substantial resources to be ploughed into the classroom. In fact, the closure of those 13 kitchens will release about £28,000. The cost of social security benefits for the 13 cooks who will be made redundant will be about £30,000 or £32,000. In the schools budget, we save £28,000 but we lose more than that from the social security budget. That does not make sense. I will be told

[Mr. Ken Maginnis]

that they are different budgets, but they are not. It all comes out of the same pot; it is all part of same cake. Someone must discover how we can save the cost, which has not been taken into account, of all the work done on the process that is called rationalisation of the school meals service in small schools but which actually loses money.

It is a question not only of money but of the future of small schools. Once their kitchens are removed, parents will become doubtful about whether the schools can continue to exist. They will ask whether it is the thin end of the wedge. They may decide that their children's future is no longer in the catchment area of the local school, so they will move closer to more viable schools. Perhaps the Government want that, but to me that is social engineering of the worst sort. We do not need such social engineering in Northern Ireland, above all places. Over the past 25 years or more, we have been trying to maintain stability in our society in Northern Ireland, but now we are tossing in a folly and calling it saving when it is the exact opposite of that. It is the destruction of the very thing that this Government, and the previous one, were publicly pledged to maintain.

The problem does not affect only the education system. I will not bore the Minister with similar examples in health and hospital services. I could give examples relating to the relocation of rates offices. Water and sewerage services were mentioned earlier. Through rationalisation, the people responsible for maintaining services are being taken further away from the areas where they work because someone thinks that it will save the electricity, light and heating costs of a small office that houses only six officers. No account seems to be taken of the extra travel involved or of the lack of contact with the people who are dependent on such services. I could go on, but there is a corollary to my point, and I hope that the Minister will give it serious consideration.

In Northern Ireland, the firm Mackie International has got into financial problems. I am not going to suggest how that happened, but I want to draw attention to the fact that the figures that were being published proved to be totally inaccurate. A large part of the industry concerned involved public funding several years ago. We must ask what has gone wrong, or whether anything has gone wrong that should not have, and whether anyone was culpable in respect of the way in which a business that had a large slice of public finance was handled.

I leave two thoughts with the Minister. First, will he exercise his authority over Departments in respect of so-called rationalisation to ensure that it is not the little fellow down at the bottom on whom the entire burden is placed? If he will not, the people being served will not get the service to which they are entitled. Secondly, will he examine firms into which large slices of public money have been poured to discover whether the money has been properly handled?

5.49 pm

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate the opportunity to speak in this debate. I had not planned to do so because, in preparing for the debate with the customary modesty of the Ulster Unionists, we were leaving space for others to participate. However, with the customary loyalty of the people of Northern Ireland who rely on the Ulster Unionists to look after their interests, the other parties have left us to make sure that they are looked after. At business questions I asked about Northern Ireland questions, so it would be a shame if we left more than one hour of this debate, although it would be nice to let the Minister have that hour to answer all our questions. If we did so, however, he would miss the privilege of saying, "I do not have time; I shall write to hon. Members."

I want to raise some of the issues, and to thank the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) for his tribute to our new Member, my hon. Friend the Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson). We appreciate his contribution. We understand that maiden speeches should be non-controversial but, within the context of the economy, we must face the fact that, as the Minister said when he opened the debate, other factors have an impact on the economy. My hon. Friend the Member for West Tyrone spoke with passion about his experiences in west Tyrone. There is no need for the hon. Member for Tewkesbury to apologise for being a Yorkshire man. One of the best Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland happened to be a Yorkshire man—[HON. MEMBERS: "He was a Lancashire man."] I am sorry, I thought that he was from Yorkshire. We shall let the battle between the whites and the reds continue elsewhere. We appreciate hon. Members taking an interest in Northern Ireland, and the more who do so the better informed the House of Commons will be, so that people are not carried away by all the campaigns of the international terrorist movement and others.

I wish to take up the point made by hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury about the impact of the two budgets. Even the Minister said tonight that money had been taken from the security budget and put into the other budgets and that, if terrorism and unrest were to continue, that money would have to be clawed back. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) has challenged those figures in the House in the past. We discovered that figures were being brandished—millions of pounds—but nobody could trace them. We want greater accountability when money is allegedly taken from our education or hospital budgets because it is supposed to go to the security budget. That was supposed to be a separate budget.

You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, were right to say that the security budget did not form part of this debate; Madam Speaker and her predecessors did the same on successive occasions. However, immediately something goes wrong, the powers that be in the Northern Ireland Office say, "Be good boys or you will not get that money." That is the point that we are making. It is a genuine point, which must be made in the circumstances.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Does my hon. Friend agree that there are strong suspicions in Northern Ireland that the cuts were directed more at securing the future of the United Kingdom in meeting European monetary union criteria than the circumstances that prevailed?

Rev. Martin Smyth: Many folk in Northern Ireland were of that opinion. It is not for me to speculate in this House, because many others have speculated and used the English language with an economy that left the rest of us wondering whether it was correct or not. I hope that that is parliamentary language.

The Minister referred to the decline in education standards in Northern Ireland. I cannot fully grasp that concept and I know that some of my colleagues have the

same problem. I may have misheard what was said. We were congratulated on the upper end of our education system and the fact that universities in Scotland, England and elsewhere are delighted to poach our best young people. Unfortunately, some teachers in Northern Ireland keep encouraging our best young people to go abroad, thereby denuding some of our universities of the quality of student that would challenge and encourage others to be the best. At the other end of the scale, we were congratulated on the fact that more people were leaving secondary education with awards and diplomas than ever before.

A problem remains, however. The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) referred to those who are deprived. Unfortunately, in some areas of Northern Ireland there has been a tradition whereby parents send their children out early to work, either to get a dead-end job with no future or to augment the family's income through social security payments. That robs some of our young people of the ability to develop. I come from such an area and feel that we should do more to provide good jobs and encourage young people to prepare for them.

However, if we constantly deride what has been happening in Northern Ireland, that will not happen. Tonight's *Belfast Telegraph*—Thursday night is job night—contains hundreds of jobs that are open to people on condition that they have the required qualifications. There is a tendency to think that the education budget is not going in the right direction to encourage some young people to improve their qualifications so that they can take the jobs that are required for this modern age.

If we were to separate the Mersey area from other parts of the United Kingdom with populations of 1.5 million and compare it with the overall "English region", as it is called, we would discover that Northern Ireland is not as deprived as we are often told. At the same time, we are not the beggars we are often accused of being. I do not for a moment deny the fact that we have benefited from being part of the United Kingdom, but so have other areas. I am sure that, like Northern Ireland, those areas would be delighted to have the Government subventions that have gone into south-east England, in defence contracts and research establishments, rather than into social security payments.

I therefore make no apology in this appropriation debate for asking the Minister whether a proper study has been conducted of the sums coming out of Northern Ireland into insurance firms and finance houses in England through some of the stores and firms that have discovered that Northern Ireland gives them the best return on capital. How is taxation being considered, or are we still working on an imaginary figure rather than dealing with reality?

I welcome the money that has been set aside. I encourage Ministers, who have taken up their posts with tremendous enthusiasm, to heed one warning: they should shake themselves loose from their civil servant minders and sometimes go out and meet real people rather than keep themselves so busy that they cannot even study their brief properly.

5.59 pm

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth), I shall take advantage of the absence of the other Northern Ireland parties to speak on my own behalf, so that, when Labour Members rush into the Chamber at 6 o'clock, they will not be disappointed to discover that the business is over.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) on his maiden speech. His election gave pleasure not only to our own party, but to many people in Northern Ireland when they saw that a pro-Union party had gained that seat. Like my hon. Friend, we all resented the way in which the media devoted excessive attention to the games of a very small party in Northern Ireland, and ignored the fact that the largest party had managed not merely to retain its position as the largest party, but had increased its lead over other parties.

My hon. Friend mentioned the museums in west Tyrone—the Ulster-American folk park and the Ulster history park—and the Museums (Northern Ireland) Order that will shortly be forthcoming. He referred to the possibility of the order being debated in the House, but unfortunately, because of the Jopling reforms, Northern Ireland legislation scarcely features in the House at all. That is one of the factors that incline me against the Jopling reforms, which I do not think have benefited the House. They have taken far too many debates off the Floor of the House. The bulk of the primary legislation made for Northern Ireland—I repeat, primary legislation—is never debated on the Floor of the House. It is debated in Committees, where one, or at most two, Northern Ireland Members are present.

That is a thoroughly unsatisfactory state of affairs. The Modernisation Committee should take that on board. I am sorry to say that, as is traditional in the House, the Committee was set up with no attempt to provide representation for the part of the United Kingdom that we represent. That reflects the habit of hon. Members on the two Front Benches of ignoring the interests of Northern Ireland, except on rare occasions, of which this debate is one. I hope that the Committee will introduce procedures that will allow Northern Ireland business to be conducted properly.

I welcome the contributions of the hon. Members for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) and for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson). Unlike representatives from Scotland and Wales, we do not resent the presence of other hon. Members at Northern Ireland business. Indeed, we welcome their interest and the contribution that they have made to the debate.

If we managed to get the Northern Ireland Grand Committee up and running, as I hope we will before too long, the paradox is that there would be more hon. Members at the sittings of the Committee than are present for this debate. One of the features of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee is that, in order to maintain the Government's majority, there are about 25 added members. Those members do attend, so we have a larger audience of English, Scots and Welsh Members at the Northern Ireland Grand Committee than when we debate on the Floor of the House.

The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde discussed the new ferry which we hope will be operational next month between Ballycastle and Campbeltown. Like the hon. Gentleman, I express the hope that that will develop tourist opportunities and lead to an increase in

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tourist movement between Northern Ireland and the west of Scotland. However, considerable effort will have to be made if the ferry is to be a success.

As I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, the Scottish Office was reluctant to authorise the use of the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry that was available, because there were serious reservations about the economic viability of the service. There must be such reservations.

The north coast of Antrim, or rather the north coast of Northern Ireland—if my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) were here, he would immediately chide me for that slip—is an area of considerable attraction to tourists, from the glens right through to Foyle. A significant number of tourists visit the area. One can easily see how coming over to Ballycastle and moving along the attractions of the north coast will appeal to them, but of course there are not many people in Kintyre to come over, and it is not likely that people will travel through Kintyre to Campbeltown to travel over.

If there is to be significant movement, it will be largely in the other direction. The problem with that is that Campbeltown will need considerable investment to be attractive to visitors. Consideration will have to be given also to the transport links north from Campbeltown through Kintyre.

There is a matter that I should mention. I did not think that I needed to declare it, as I derive no financial benefit from it, although I derive social benefits. My sister-in-law runs a guest house in Machrihanish, on the other side of Kintyre from Campbeltown. Consequently, I am familiar with the long journey from Stranraer to Campbeltown, and I will take advantage of the new ferry. Being familiar with the roads through Kintyre and the condition of the town of Campbeltown, I am aware of the need for considerable investment on that side if the venture is to be successful.

Dr. Godman: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that the assessment of the economic viability of the service should not be confined to two or three years, but would need to be carried out over a period of at least five or six years, to allow it to develop.

Mr. Trimble: I agree entirely. In order for the service to be attractive, there will have to be investment in Kintyre and Campbeltown, which will take time. There will also have to be promotion of the tourist opportunities. I hope that the Northern Ireland tourist board and the Scottish tourist bodies are co-operating on the project. Can the Minister tell us whether any active co-operation is taking place?

We hear a great deal in political terms about the advisability of cross-frontier co-operation on the north-south axis. A considerable amount of such co-operation takes place with respect to matters where there is any pragmatic value to be obtained from it. We do not hear enough about the need for more co-operation and joint ventures on an east-west basis. The project that I have described is a clear example where there ought to be such co-operation. So far it has not been forthcoming. The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde may know better than I do, but I do not think that any significant assistance was given by the Northern Ireland Office to get the new ferry into operation. I hope there will be such assistance to develop it.

We have similar problems with the development of the Northern Ireland economy. Because Northern Ireland is a peripheral region of the United Kingdom, one of our biggest problems is transport links. We need the best possible transport links for goods and people. The greatest problems arise in Scotland, not in Northern Ireland. There has been investment in the ports of Stranraer and Belfast, so that, particularly in Larne, we have a state-of-the-art ro-ro facility, and Belfast is developing as well.

However, if one moves from Larne and Belfast, with their first-class ports, across to Scotland, to Cairnryan and Stranraer, one sees nothing like the same facilities or investment. The road connections through to Carlisle are not as good as they could be, and the rail connections are virtually non-existent. For years Ulster Unionist Members have been pressing for more investment in the west of Scotland, along the transport routes, but Scottish Office Ministers have not responded. Even when the former Secretary of State for Scotland represented the constituency concerned, we did not see any action. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why he is no longer in this place.

Reference was made at the outset to overall expenditure and spending plans. I have several general questions regarding the Government's review of expenditure and the extent to which they are committed to existing expenditure programmes. I understand why the Chancellor of the Exchequer decided to impose some expenditure restraint on his party by making a commitment to retain the previous Government's expenditure programmes. However, I am surprised that he went one step further and locked in detailed departmental figures—particularly for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

I assumed that the Labour party, which represents virtually all Welsh seats and most of those in Scotland, would be keenly aware of the fact that the previous Government deliberately cut expenditure in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in their last Budget in order to allocate more funds to England. They did so for purely political reasons. There were expenditure increases for certain favoured programmes, such as education, in England and Wales, but that did not occur in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

I remember former Ministers claiming that £30 million extra would be devoted to the Northern Ireland education programme. However, as the Minister said in opening tonight's debate, we have seen a reduction in education expenditure in Northern Ireland. Expenditure levels were also held down in Scotland and Wales for political reasons, and the Barnett formula was not fully applied. Given the Labour party's pattern of representation, I assumed that it would want to right the injustices done to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. I understand the Chancellor's desire to restrain expenditure overall, but I thought that he would make some adjustments.

Hon. Members will know that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not specially favoured in public expenditure terms. The comparisons made in terms of expenditure per capita are misleading. The particular circumstances of the regions necessitate higher spending levels. Expenditure is related to need and to the objective of providing a common standard of service. Regions with high unemployment, more health problems and a less well-off population require greater expenditure. Service delivery costs more when the population is dispersed over a wider area. It is not as though the level of service offered

to the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is significantly better than that offered to the people of England—in fact, as a result of the last Government's spending plans, the level of provision is decreasing.

I had hoped tonight to hear some details about the Government's expenditure plans. I hope that the expenditure review will be flexible and, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Tyrone said, there will be some virement within the Northern Ireland budget. It would be foolish to apply the Chancellor's rule about maintaining existing departmental budgets to the six Northern Ireland Departments. If the Northern Ireland budget has to be capped, there should be an opportunity for virement.

Mr. Paul Murphy: The hon. Gentleman is completely correct: there is scope for virement within the Northern Ireland budget and within the budgets of the Northern Ireland Departments. However, there is no such scope between Whitehall Departments.

Mr. Trimble: I thank the Minister for that encouraging clarification. I am sorry that he went on to reinforce the bad news, but at least we know that it will be possible to move funds between the Northern Ireland Departments.

I turn now to two specific matters. The first concerns the question of education, and I return to the comments of the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde. He mentioned the amount of money that is allocated to targeting social need. That is a worthwhile objective, which may involve programmes that address social need and that seek to improve the position of those who are less well off. However, I question the purpose of including a line of expenditure that targets social need in the education budget. The education budget should be used for educational purposes: to educate people and raise standards in schools.

The correlation between social need and educational achievement is not certain. There is a degree of correlation, but it is not precise. There is a high level of educational attainment in some areas of great social need. That is an important point. Even if there were a correlation between social need and educational attainment, the money that is devoted to schools under TSN is not used for educational purposes. It is treated merely as a general addition to the budget and is not directed towards individual families who are in need.

The large sums distributed to some schools under TSN become part of the general budget. That money is not tied to educational need and no check is made of how it is spent. The school governors simply have more money at their disposal, which they may spend as they see fit. No one asks any questions. That is a very inefficient procedure. The criterion used to allocate TSN funding is the entitlement to free school meals. As my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South said, that is a very uncertain criterion to apply, as many of those in need do not qualify for free school meals and are left out of the equation. Unfairness in that regard leads to further unfairness when the TSN programme is applied to schools.

About 7 per cent. of the education budget is distributed by referring to free school meals. That is an increase on the figure that the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde cited, which was accurate for the year to which he referred. That, and expenditure on other programmes, top-slices the general educational budget in Northern Ireland quite significantly and depresses the amount of money available to individual schools. Expenditure is often very tight at schools whose pupils are not entitled to free school meals. We face a crisis—that is not too strong a word—in education funding in Northern Ireland because many schools do not receive sufficient money through TSN and related programmes.

I have a friend who is a schoolteacher at a very successful primary school in my constituency. Student numbers at the school last year increased by 30 to about 400, but he has been told that he must make two teachers redundant because of budgetary pressures. Perhaps those posts will be saved by the £4 million that the Minister said will be available for education. That first-aid money might rescue some of the hundreds of teaching posts that were due to be lost in Northern Ireland. It might rescue them for one year only, but it certainly will not solve the long-term problem, which is related to the overall education budget.

The problem affects some schools more than others. I could refer the Minister to the detailed expenditure of schools which have similar geographical locations and student numbers and serve the same sorts of populations, but which face considerable budgetary differences because the criteria are applied unfairly. There is unfairness for individual schools and for categories of school. There is discrimination in favour of the maintained sector and against the controlled sector.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Very much so.

Mr. Trimble: Indeed.

There is severe discrimination against the controlled sector, and it is that sector that is in crisis. If something drastic is not done to tackle the issue within the next year or two, large parts of the controlled sector will be in a state of collapse. Unfortunately, there are many in Northern Ireland who regard this skew in the expenditure budget as related to the people who run the Department.

I do not, of course, refer to Labour Ministers, who are Ministers only by courtesy in terms of title rather than substance, because they are not heads of the Departments of which they are said to be Ministers. We know who is to blame, and Ministers may take some comfort from that. There is a serious problem, however, and it must be addressed.

I suggest that there are solutions. There may be a need in some instances to put additional funds into certain schools to improve educational attainment. Indeed, there is a raising school standards initiative, but the criteria under which it operates are open to question. There is clearly a need to raise attainment in some schools.

Information is available to enable that to be done on purely education grounds. That information comes from the tests that are set in schools at key stages 4, 7 and so on. From the results of these tests, we have purely educational information that shows levels of attainment. We should be switching the criteria on which moneys are distributed away from free school meals, which is not an especially good criterion, towards attainment in schools.

Results come in at key stage 4 and then on upwards that reflect personal progress through school. The tests would be a better guide if we had a test or assessment at

[Mr. Trimble]

entry level, and that is coming, albeit rather slowly. It is being piloted this year in England and Wales, and it is expected that the scheme will be developed generally.

When that process has taken place, we shall have entry-level assessment, and, subsequently through a child's career at school, points at which education attainment can be assessed. We shall then be able to fine-tune the funds that go to schools to enable them to raise standards and improve levels of attainment. At the same time, something should be done to ensure that additional moneys are well spent.

I move on to the closure of health facilities, and especially homes. The Minister knows that my constituents and I are seeking meetings with him to discuss these closures. This evening, however, I shall give him a foretaste of some of the points that will be made later, as and when we have the opportunity to speak to him.

I had hoped that the change of Government might result in a change of policy towards the closure of residential and other homes, but there appears so far to be no change. Perhaps a policy change is waiting on the conclusion of the review on financial matters, but the sooner the change comes, the better. There have been far too many closures.

The Minister will know that the Craigavon and Banbridge social services trust has recently taken a decision to close the Edenderry home in Portadown, and to give a six-month stay of execution to the Hoop Hill home in Lurgan.

The Hoop Hill home is for the mentally infirm, and is the only such home in the entire southern region. It will be closed in six months if the Minister does not intervene or if additional funds are not made available. If the closure takes place, there will be no statutory provision for the mentally infirm in the southern region. That is not satisfactory. Leaving aside the individual circumstances of the home, it is surely unsatisfactory to have no provision in the statutory sector.

It has been tried over recent years to introduce partnership between the private and statutory sectors, and one understands and supports that. That should not mean, however, that there is no statutory provision. As I have said, I leave aside the circumstances of the individual home, which is an extremely good one, custom-built with extremely good and caring staff. I leave aside also the inevitable distress that will be caused to residents as and when they are moved. I stress the wisdom of maintaining some provision in the statutory sector.

The Edenderry home is slightly different, in that it is residential and not for the mentally infirm. That being so, there is some alternative provision. As a result of the changes that have taken place in the Craigavon area, however, it is now the last statutory home in Craigavon. A succession of such homes have been closed. I remember being involved in fighting the closure of the Moylinn home in the Brownlow district of Craigavon a couple of years ago. As I have said, Edenderry is the last remaining home, but it is due to be closed.

Craigavon is a substantial area, and is now, I think, the second largest district in Northern Ireland in population terms. It will not be too long before the population reaches 100,000. There will be no statutory provision, however, for residential homes. The working party that recommended closure referred to the many homes that are available in the private sector. It claimed that there were more homes available in that sector in the Craigavon district than in other areas which it examined. That was a dubious statement, because I doubt whether it was true in proportionate terms. The provision proportionately in Craigavon is not, I think, as good as in the areas where comparisons were made.

Other factors bear on the closure of the Edenderry home. Policy was set by the Department and its board, which meant that the trust was forced into an exercise in which it had to choose one of three homes to close. It had to make comparisons between them. A paper was produced supposedly bearing witness to the comparisons made. The paper is largely unintelligible and irrational. I use my terms carefully and deliberately.

The paper claims to make a comparison of three homes on the basis of certain criteria. It claims also to award scores to the three homes on each of the points in the criteria. There are detailed tables with numbers against various points. The numbers are totted up, and it is found that there are certain scores. There is a variation of about 30 points out of 750 between the three homes. It was decided that the home with the fewest points should be closed.

It is an irrational exercise as presented. At no point is any explanation offered of why any one of the three homes was given any particular score on any of the criteria. We are left with a series of tables in which figures have been inserted. For all we know, those who conducted the exercise merely stared at the ceiling, thought of a number and wrote it down. Alternatively, they closed their eyes, thought of a number and put it down. No reason is given anywhere to show how a score was arrived at.

The Minister will hear at length from my constituents and me that we are amused at the scores given on ease of implementation, which is ease of closure. The report tells us that the Edenderry home will be the easiest to close, but, uniquely of the three, the Edenderry home is the subject of a charitable trust and cannot be closed without an application to the courts, which would take time and cost money. Those factors appear not to have been taken into account. We may find that that issue is ventilated in another place at a later stage.

Even if the Minister feels that he is precluded from examining the merits of the two homes that I have mentioned, I hope that he will consider the general policy, and not simply carry on with the policies adopted by the previous Administration; otherwise, the current jibes will be deemed to be accurate. The most significant recent jibe is that the Labour party won the election because it positioned itself to the right of the Conservative party.

I should like the Minister to examine the policy seriously. We want a change in policy, so that the health service in Northern Ireland does not continue to deteriorate. We also want changes in education policy.

During the general election, the issue that was most often mentioned to my colleagues and me on the doorsteps was education, and the problems that are occurring owing to the underfunding of schools. I hope that the Minister will deal with those problems urgently and energetically.

6.30 pm

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): I concur with the remarks of the leader of my party, and having had the opportunity to spend a good hour with the Minister

responsible for education in Northern Ireland, I shall not repeat them. However, last evening, I did not take the opportunity to pursue the matter of the genuine need for additional funding for universities in Northern Ireland. Far too many of our young people are forced to obtain university places in Great Britain. That would not be so bad if they were to return immediately after obtaining qualifications. That problem affects both communities. Those young people generally form life partnerships during their university years, and we do not get the benefit of their expertise and qualifications for many years.

It is a sad state of affairs that so many of our youngsters have entry qualifications that would easily find them places in universities in Great Britain, but because of the shortage of university places in Northern Ireland, only those with the highest qualifications are accepted. Although we welcome and encourage students from outside Northern Ireland, every student from outside Ulster who obtains a place at a university in Northern Ireland displaces one of our own students. Will the Minister please take that matter seriously and consider the cost to parents? He should also consider the problem of poorer families who cannot afford to support their children at universities away from home on the mainland.

During the period of phoney peace in Northern Ireland, which we all enjoyed while it lasted, Northern Ireland hotels and guest houses were overwhelmed with visitors, and the shortage of bed spaces became evident. That problem has been addressed to some extent by investment encouraged and supported by the Northern Ireland tourist board. That investment has produced a number of new hotels and extensions to existing hotels.

I appeal to those responsible to consider the plight of smaller family hotels, which have struggled through the 30 lean years of trouble, and have just managed to break even. They need investment and grant aid to encourage further investment. It would be of great assistance to smaller hoteliers if a scheme were introduced to provide funding and encouragement.

I want to bring to the Minister's attention a problem in my constituency. For many years, Ministers in previous Administrations went to the trouble of visiting the Gobbins path in Islandmagee, which is a unique feature. It was once one of the biggest tourist attractions in Northern Ireland, but sadly, because of lack of maintenance, the bridges to significant views and sites collapsed into the sea.

It would cost too much for a small local council such as Larne borough council to use even its share of millennium funding to reinstate that visitor attraction. It is not a white elephant: the millennium fund has accepted that it is a worthwhile project that would add to the existing attractions of the giants' causeway, the mountains of Mourne and the green glens of Antrim. Because it is such a major project, and because it needs such investment, the burden on a small district council would be too much. I ask those newly appointed to the Northern Ireland Office to examine how support can be given to councils that make investments that are beneficial Provincewide.

To help the Minister obtain some of the moneys required for such investment, I bring to his attention the serious problem of the hundreds of thousands of pounds that are lost annually in Northern Ireland because some in the road haulage industry use diesel fuel on which duty is not paid—red diesel. Presumably, there are insufficient staff in Customs and Excise to deal with that problem. I am sure that the Exchequer is being defrauded of hundreds of thousands of pounds because that matter is not being pursued.

Some units are being constructed with disguised fuel tanks that are capable of taking up to 200 gallons at a time, which can be drawn into the engine for consumption by the flick of a switch in the cab. The taxpayer loses out and, even worse, legitimate businesses that pay their drivers well, keep their vehicles roadworthy and incur the massive taxation cost of being on the road are put at risk because of the illegal use of fuel throughout Northern Ireland. It is used for journeys to and from both the Irish Republic and Great Britain. I ask that that matter be given urgent attention, so that the taxpayer can benefit and legitimate companies can have fair competition.

I had not intended to speak at all this evening. Although ours is the largest party from Northern Ireland in the House, usually only two of our representatives get to speak in such a debate. On a good night three of us get in, but on a special evening such as this—when the Ulster Unionist party, as it always has done, has again represented the interests of the people of Northern Ireland—more than three of us have had the chance to speak.

6.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Tony Worthington): I shall do my best to answer as many points as I can. My first pleasure is to welcome the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) to his new position. I hope that he will enjoy his responsibilities for Northern Ireland as much as we all enjoy ours. I believe that he comes from the Euro-sane wing of the Conservative party; I wonder whether he has been stationed in Northern Ireland for that reason—but then I also see, sitting beside him on the Front Bench, someone from the other wing of the Tory party: the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Cran).

I am sure that the hon. Member for Esher and Walton will link up well with our newly appointed Northern Ireland Minister responsible for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy).

The hon. Gentleman asked me about the powers that a local Assembly would have—perhaps the simplest point with which I shall have to deal all evening. That is for the parties in Northern Ireland to sit down and discuss—soon, we hope.

I was astonished to hear what the hon. Gentleman said about the private finance initiative. He gave the impression that it was a smoothly purring machine that had been heavily funding large numbers of projects until the incoming Labour Government interrupted it. What nonsense. Here was a project hailed as the saviour of the Conservative party's public expenditure plans five years ago which has, in the event, disgorged virtually nothing. Indeed, we have had to rescue the PFI and cut out some of the bureaucratic, time-consuming procedures involved in the bidding process—a process that was threatening to become more expensive than the projects themselves.

We intend to be more imaginative and to find out whether the PFI or public-private partnerships can actually deliver. We shall energetically set about giving the scheme a chance to work.

[Mr. Tony Worthington]

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton, along with several others, discussed transfers between Departments. They have always occurred, they do occur and they will continue to occur. The most immediate example that springs to mind was when we transferred money from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which was generating more capital receipts than anticipated by the previous Government, to the education budget. The Secretary of State has the power to move items from one heading to another. We are at present involved in a root-and-branch analysis of the expenditure by the former Government, to determine how it can better reflect Labour party priorities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), like other hon. Members, mentioned the new passenger service between Ballycastle and Campbeltown. We hope that it will succeed. It will need marketing co-operation on the Scottish and Northern Irish sides; it has received European funding. We certainly hope that it generates the passenger volumes that will be necessary.

My hon. Friend contributed to the report on under-achievement in schools, which was also mentioned by the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble). We shall respond to that report in a Command Paper, which we hope will appear before the summer recess. It was a valuable report, which will inform the general review that we are undertaking.

Several hon. Members asked about steering money towards remedying educational under-achievement. That involves much more than top-slicing 5 per cent. for the targeting of social need. On arriving in government, we found seven separate funding formulae for schools in a region with a population of 1.6 million people. That raises questions about the effectiveness of school funding. We have recently received a Coopers and Lybrand report on that very issue, and we shall take it into account when looking at ways of targeting educational and social need.

We shall also review the progress of the raising school standards initiative, now in its second year and with one more year to go. We can learn from it. We fought the election on the idea that there can be no higher priority than raising school standards. Above all, that means improving the chances of low achievers in schools.

There is no question but that the Northern Ireland system is highly effective at getting youngsters into university—as many as in Scotland and more than in England and Wales. But the system also continues to turn out under-achievers. The prospects for them and their families are, of course, dispiriting. Instead of being able to contribute to community life, some people's lives are blighted by the under-achievement that stems from a lack of qualifications. We are reviewing that, too, with the aim of changing it.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde, I pay tribute to the voluntary organisations' contribution to the life of Northern Ireland. It was a pleasure yesterday to attend the reception held here for UK organisations involved in after-school play activities. We are pleased that the £3.5 million from the European Union will begin to yield benefits in the autumn, when the first of 100 after-school clubs will begin to be funded. I hope that Playboard and other organisations will look into the possibility of funds from the midweek lottery going to after-school activities. I, for one, would welcome that.

The hon. Member for South Antrim (Mr. Forsythe) raised a great many points, but I cannot respond to the ones involving unnamed planning applications in unnamed places—

Mr. Forsythe: The Minister will understand that I was making general points, not specific ones. This is not the place for specific details.

Mr. Worthington: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. If he could put more substance into those points, I should be delighted to respond to them and to examine the procedures.

The hon. Gentleman raised the assertion that the Department of the Environment is both a polluter and pollution controller. As he will know, on 1 April 1996, the previous Government established the Environment and Heritage Service as a next steps agency, following a full assessment of the options for the delivery of environmental functions and heritage protection. It is important for us to watch the development of the agency and to see how it operates. If, at the end of that time, the position is inadequate, we must address it, but as the organisation has existed for a year, it would be a bit precipitate to change it.

The hon. Gentleman and I know that Northern Ireland's road safety record is unfortunate. He referred to our Committee sittings on that. Eventually, last year, important legislation was put through to penalise, for example, bad drivers, which, we hope, will yield resources. Recently, more money has gone into measures such as traffic calming, which should improve road safety.

On quangos, again, one returns to the fact that the quango state of Northern Ireland could be dealt with most effectively if the talks were to succeed. When there is an elected Assembly within Northern Ireland, the necessity for excessive quangoisation will disappear. I hope that that will come along. At present, we have to deal with each quango on a one-by-one basis. In some areas, we shall certainly examine the role of appointed rather than elected bodies, and come to conclusions on a one-by-one merit basis.

Mr. Forsythe: Before the Minister leaves the issue of the Department of the Environment and roads, may I remind him that road safety officer numbers have been reduced or maintained at the former level?

Mr. Worthington: We shall have to wait and see what happens over the next year. No decisions have been taken at present. We are working on the previous Government's budgets. The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office has written—and I think that the degree of consultation that we have embarked on is unprecedented—to each of the parties, asking for suggestions to increase the budget next year. It will be interesting to receive their proposals for cutting expenditure that is being wasted. We look forward to receiving from all the parties a lengthy list of proposals. We wait in hope, but I suspect that they will be outnumbered by proposals for increased expenditure.

Rev. Martin Smyth: One of our difficulties is that we cannot compare the figures. Would it be possible for the

Minister to tell us the cost of the consultation during the two or three years that were spent planning traffic calming in the Holy Land and the cost of the ultimate outcome? That issue has been raised with me by people who object to the scheme. On the other hand, less expensive calming measures have been denied in other regions that have wanted them. If we had some of those figures, we might be able to give the Minister some guidance.

Mr. Worthington: It will not astonish the hon. Gentleman to know that he cannot have those figures right at this moment. I do not know whether I heard him right, but I thought that he referred to traffic calming measures in the Holy Land. I do not actually have those to hand at present.

The Child Support Agency was introduced with all-party support. I have already established good contact with the CSA in Belfast, which, in addition to serving Northern Ireland, serves a considerable amount of eastern England. My impression is that the work of the CSA in Northern Ireland is towards the top of the CSA's UK performance chart. The annual report will come out shortly, and I can only encourage the hon. Member for South Antrim to get in touch with the director of the CSA in Northern Ireland and put his points to him. However, I have been impressed with its work so far and we have just set new targets for it.

I congratulate the hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) on his maiden speech. We remember vividly his predecessor, Rev. William McCrea, who, I suppose, was unique among hon. Members—he was probably the only Member who could fill Waterfront hall three nights running. That was not because of his political skills, but because of his gospel singing skills. I do not know whether he is going to intensify his efforts in that field, but he was a memorable Member.

I was at the Ulster-American folk park last week, so I found out at first hand the contribution that it makes. I heard the concerns of the director and others about the merger. It is so well advanced that we now have to implement it. There is no alternative. We are promised gains from the merger, but I did hear, as one always does when one goes to the west of the Province, people's fears that they will be forgotten about. Sometimes those fears may be excessive, but it has registered with me.

I apologise if I miss any points out. The hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) made a point about integrated schools. The number of integrated schools has expanded in recent years, but they still cater for only 2 per cent. of children. The previous Government and ourselves support the idea of integrated schools, where parents want them, where parents can demonstrate clearly that there is a demand for such schools and where that demand is robust and can be afforded, alongside the presence of other schools, which is important. There is, as elsewhere, a surplus of school places, so we shall consider the proposals sympathetically.

We hope that the talks will deliver in relation to local government, with the people of Northern Ireland deciding on such powers, but recently there have been some steps forward. Some local authorities have made considerable contributions through their involvement in district partnerships, using European money. Some of them are seizing on their newish economic development powers, to increase their role in society, and of course we welcome that.

The hon. Member for—is it still Fermanagh and South Tyrone?

Mr. Maginnis: I reassure the Minister that I am still the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone and that he will be welcome when he eventually finds his way to Dungannon or Enniskillen, where we have missed his presence so far.

Mr. Worthington: Now that the hon. Gentleman has returned home, it would be time for me to start visiting him. Recently, I have found it difficult to contact him at times and I should welcome the chance to go to Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I welcome his budget suggestions. Of course, we always have to be aware of the knock-on effects of any rationalisation, but we have to insist that things are run efficiently. If services are run inefficiently, it takes away from services elsewhere. There is no doubt that sometimes what appear to be economies are only false economies, and we have to bear that in mind.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned Mackie's. It would not be proper for me to comment on the affairs of a particular company, but we are aware of the situation and shall give what support we can. The IDB is in close contact with the company, and I am sure that the relevant Minister—the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride (Mr. Ingram), who is sitting beside me—will be willing to talk to the hon. Gentleman about that.

I think that the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) misheard the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen, who did not refer to any decline in standards in Northern Ireland's schools. As is the case in the rest of the United Kingdom, it is absolutely crucial that we do not become satisfied with the standards in Northern Ireland. As we said many times during the election, standards have to be raised to match the best in Europe, although standards in Northern Ireland are relatively high already.

The hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) mentioned university places. We recognise that the shortage of places in Northern Ireland is a serious problem. As he will know, we are awaiting the Dearing report, which we anticipate will appear next month. It should give us clues as to the ways ahead. We accept what the hon. Gentleman said about the consequences for Northern Ireland of a shortage of places. We accept that the problem has to be dealt with in the medium and long term, but we need to take guidance from the report.

I see that the hon. Member for Upper Bann has returned to his seat. I dealt with the issue of targeting education and social need in his absence, and it would be unfair to go over the point again. The Government have been active on the social and economic front since we took office, because we recognise how important it is that economic and social policy should help our political policy.

Unemployment, poverty, inequality and unfairness are fertile ground for social and political unrest, so we have to use education and training to provide opportunities for all. Indeed, we have already taken action on, for example, schools, where the situation that we inherited was unacceptable. Teachers were being made inappropriately redundant and class sizes were rising. Not to act would have set back our long-term objective of lower class sizes.

[Mr. Worthington]

Our action was greatly welcomed. Instead of the increase in the schools budget being below the rate of inflation, it is now slightly above.

We have also acted to end the indecision in the further education colleges. For years, the previous Government had intended to create self-governing colleges, but had failed to progress the necessary legislation, and the colleges were left in limbo. They will now become self-governing on 1 April next year. Unlike what happened under the previous Government, colleges will now go forward in the spirit of co-operation with other colleges, schools and universities rather than in selfish competition.

We believe that further education and training are best provided on a Northern Ireland basis, but they need a strategic framework for development.

Mr. Roy Beggs: There are great prospects for creating employment in the tourist industry in Northern Ireland. If we have permanent peace, the demand that we previously experienced will be surpassed. Will the Minister consider the need to secure funding for the Northern Ireland tourist and hospitality training council, to ensure that the proper training is afforded our young people so that those engaged in the industry can meet the standards that visitors have come to expect?

Mr. Worthington: That matter is on my desk at the moment, but we need effective training councils. We cannot simply support bodies that have the right name, but which might not be delivering. We need to know what is wanted in Northern Ireland as a whole, rather than simply hoping that the colleges will provide the skills needed for the tourist industry.

We took a major step forward when we decided that the same Minister would be responsible for education and training. There had been an unnecessary divide. We are also reviewing the provision of post-16 education and training, to make sure that all our education and training needs are being met in the most effective way.

One of the most important matters on which we have taken action and about which more details will emerge next week is the ambitious welfare-to-work programme, which will particularly benefit Northern Ireland, with its high rates of youth and adult unemployment. I have already referred to the action that we have taken to free up the private finance initiative. It will take a long time to remedy the decades of under-investment in the infrastructure, schools and hospitals of Northern Ireland, but we must rapidly find out what the PFI can deliver.

We are already proceeding with proposals to create a food standards agency under the control of Health Ministers. We have gone ahead with proposals for a major development at Altnagelvin hospital. I did in fact get very close to Fermanagh the other day, when I was pleased to open more renal dialysis beds in Tyrone. We finally confirmed the new Causeway hospital.

It will take us some time to tackle the root causes of some of the problems of over-administration in the health service, to deal with the two-tierism of fundholding, to end the internal market and to create an administration system that is lean and effective and which ensures that the maximum resources go to patient care. I have not met one Northern Ireland Member who believes that the present structure of administration in the health service in Northern Ireland is lean and effective.

As my hon. Friend the Minister of State said at the outset, the Government are dedicated to ensuring that these appropriations are used with the maximum effectiveness. The greatest help that we can be given is for the resources earmarked for security purposes to be made available for positive things such as health and education. As my hon. Friend said, we are currently involved in the most comprehensive ever spending review across the Northern Ireland block, and hon. Members can be assured that our aim is to ensure that every penny spent reflects the priorities that we so clearly outlined when we fought the election. We have asked the parties in Northern Ireland to help us in that.

Every hon. Member who has spoken today recognises Northern Ireland's enormous potential. Tourism simply shot up in the year of the ceasefire, and manufacturing growth has over the years outstripped that in the rest of Great Britain, but what is crucial to the success of Northern Ireland is the confidence that comes with effective talks and a new ceasefire.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Appropriation (No. 2) (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 11th June, be approved.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether I could leave with you an important point of order that I want to raise tonight, which perhaps could be discussed with Madam Speaker over the next few days.

Oral questions for the Chancellor of the Exchequer were being tabled today. I sought to table a question to ask

"what measures he proposes to increase resources for essential public services."

My point of order is in two parts. First, even if the question was deemed unacceptable, it should still have gone in what I think is called the shuffle or raffle. Under our Standing Orders, Madam Speaker has the power to decide that a question that is deemed inappropriate should not be put. However, it should have gone into the shuffle to be decided on subsequently.

I told the Clerks that I felt strongly about the issue. I did not accept the view that the question should be rejected because it was too open. I made it clear that I contested the argument on a point of principle.

Secondly, as an alternative to my wording of asking

"what measures he proposes to increase resources for essential public services"

I was offered the words:

"what measures he proposes to increase resources for demand-led public services."

The difference seems minimal. If my question was too open, so was the alternative.

I am not criticising the Clerks for saying that they thought that the question was too open, but it seems to me fundamental that if a Member of Parliament feels strongly and challenges a decision on a question, it should go in the shuffle. If the question is subsequently deemed inappropriate, it can be expunged, but it is wrong for the

issue to be dealt with as it has been. I believe that my question should have gone in the shuffle and I do not accept that it is too open.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The best course of action for the hon. Gentleman is to take up any rejection of a parliamentary question with Madam Speaker privately.

Mr. Mackinlay: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I would have done that, but my central point is that there was not time. A blue card was apparently flagged up for me on the board, but it reached me after the shuffle. I told the Clerk that I challenged his view. I am not complaining about the fact that he took a different view from me, but I believe that the proper procedure is that the question should go into the shuffle. Battle can then be joined privately.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The best advice that I can give the hon. Gentleman is to take the matter up with Madam Speaker, as is the tradition in the House. That must be done privately, when he can go into the detail that he has gone into in his point of order.

Public Order (Northern Ireland)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Ms Bridget Prentice.]*

7.12 pm

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate having the opportunity to raise the operation of the public order legislation in Northern Ireland, having come up in the raffle or the shuffle. I have been seeking an opportunity for some weeks.

I recognise that Ministers were talking about unrest in the previous debate and the problems for tourist attractions. A few years ago, I had a telephone call from someone in Pittsburgh who wanted to know whether it was safe to come to Northern Ireland. I said that it was and that there were no difficulties. A short time after that, there was rioting in Detroit, so I rang and said that I was thinking of going over there that year but wondered whether it would be safe enough to go. The answer came back, "Point taken."

Those who keep emphasising the problems of Northern Ireland do not create confidence. We must bear that in mind. I am not minimising the problems, but we should not think of the jump from 1995 to 1996 as a wonderful landmark, forgetting that the world's media were coming and for months we had fact finders and trail blazers from the American President.

We were told last year that tourism had decreased dramatically around Londonderry and Belfast. I remember going to the Europa hotel in Belfast on 11 July last year to meet media people; I was speaking to Senator Mitchell's entourage there. I discovered other people who had pre-booked and were being redirected to other places because there was no room at the inn. I regret that some in the tourism industry are a little like farmers—they want each year to be better than the one before, forgetting that sometimes we have seven full years and seven lean years. We must put the issue in context.

People ask why we parade and what religious connotations there are in some parades. In the Old Testament, the people sang as they were glad when they went up to the house of the Lord. In the New Testament, there was a procession through Jerusalem when people cried, "Hosanna!" The people who did not like Jesus wanted him to ask his disciples to keep quiet. He said that, if they were to keep quiet, the stones would cry out. Walsingham is a pilgrimage site. We could go on and on naming other parades: American Independence day on 4 July, Bastille day on 14 July—they can be found everywhere.

People talk about the blocking of roads. We block main roads in Northern Ireland for longer periods for motor bike races, but there is not undue concern about that. The French dockers and others managed to block the roads around the channel ports and lost the country far more than our tragic losses of last year.

I am not minimising the issues, but I want to put them in context rather than have them over-emphasised. When Ministers talk about the amount of money lost as a result of stoppages last year—again, I am not minimising the issue—it should be put in context. When Private Lee Clegg was released, some £20 million-worth of damage was done in Northern Ireland. I have heard no cries about that.

[Rev. Martin Smyth]

I could go on and on about that, but I do not want to do so. I merely wanted to put the background of the issue. The famous march to Bodenstown took place at the weekend, in which Martin McGuinness took part. The speeches at Bodenstown have traditionally outlined the policy of republicanism for the coming year. It will be interesting to examine what signals come from there.

The problems began in 1985 with the Anglo-Irish Agreement. If any hon. Members want to read good contemporary fiction that is close to the bone, I recommend "Rogue Element" by Strong. The author depicts patterns of events since 1985 in a way too realistic for certain people to be able to rest content in their beds at night, knowing that the damage that they have done to the United Kingdom has been exposed.

Before the problems of recent years, marches generally passed off peacefully. They were regarded as a much cherished part of our heritage. Some people say that Roman Catholics were never involved, but I met several in demonstration fields. Some were glad to make a living there and nobody chased them away. We must face the harsh reality that the truth has been distorted.

Another factor was the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987. I opposed much of it in draft and thankfully some details were fine-tuned. Had it become law in its original form, we would not have been allowed the privilege or the pleasure of a traditional Salvation Army band playing on our streets and conducting open-air services. We would not have been able to give Barry McGuigan a spontaneous welcome when he came back with his world title. More significantly, trade unionists would have been unable to participate in spontaneous walk-outs.

Although we fine-tuned the legislation, it was not sufficient, and I continue to believe that it presents problems. Unlike public order legislation in England, under which more than 20 people are not allowed to assemble, in Northern Ireland the number is only six.

The Minister of State is from Scotland. I am sure that he is aware of young folk gathering on street corners intending no harm whatever. In Northern Ireland, however, if a police officer had had a row with the station sergeant and was feeling rather bilious, or if he had fallen out with his girl friend and did not like the look of six young people standing on a corner, he could tell them to move on. The young folk might well say, "Why should we move on? We are doing no harm." Under the public order order, he could then throw his weight around. I believe that the order was drawn too tightly.

More significantly, the order was absolutely unnecessary in regard to Orange parades, because the police were always notified. Most parades followed a time-honoured pattern and covered the same routes. As a lad, I remember the local constable coming to see my father, who for 21 years was marshal of the Belfast Apprentice Boys, months beforehand to verify the route so that everything could be kept in order.

Even today, many church services are included in the 3,000 so-called loyalist parades, which the media usually describe as Orange parades. They are not all Orange parades. Last week, in County Down, there was reference in the local media to an Orange parade. I heard about it as I was travelling in the car and I said that there was no Orange parade there. When I was asked how I knew, I explained that I knew the traditions and that I suspected that it was a band parade. I was right. The following day, the media described it as a band parade. So there is some confusion and Orange parades are often used as a bogeyman.

It is absolutely unnecessary to insist on seven days' notice. Amazingly, we were told that it was at the request of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. As is our tradition, we abided by the law and gave seven days' notice. That does not work as, when patterns are changed, they are often lost.

Northern Ireland is a small place. On one humorous occasion, a series of protests were organised on a particular Saturday to commemorate Ulster day. The senior police officers went to the secretary of the Belfast Orange county lodge and said, "That was a good hand. We knew that you were doing something, but we did not know that there would be three." They would have known about them all had they not required seven days' notice. We abided strictly by the law.

Having explained the background, let us consider what is now causing trouble—the growth of residents groups in Northern Ireland. There are those who say they are genuine spontaneous gatherings. It took Radio Telefis Eireann to do what the BBC failed to do time and again—to expose the duplicity of Sinn Fein and Adams. As a result, in *The Guardian* on 5 March and the *Belfast Telegraph* on 6 March—the *Belfast Telegraph* was a day behind *The Guardian*—it was revealed that Adams told republicans that the stand-off at Drumcree which resulted in the murder of a Catholic, the displacement of families from their homes and millions of pounds' worth of damage was the product of three years' work. That was not work by the Orange or Protestant community in Portadown; it was Sinn Fein doing what it started in 1966 through undercover operations—using perceived or real grievances and putting innocent people up front. Sinn Fein was the puppeteer pulling the strings. When Adams was confronted with that allegation, he did not deny it. His accusation against the media was that they had used underhand methods to discover what was going on as they had recorded his voice.

It was not an innocent concern that led Brendan McKenna to form the residents group in Garvaghy road and a newcomer to the Ormeau road—Gerard Rice—to form the Lower Ormeau road concerned community group; it was part of a Sinn Fein policy to cause civil unrest throughout the country.

Of course there have been reactions, and we have challenged them. I have received two letters from solicitors representing Brendan McKenna saying that he would take me to court for alleging that he had paramilitary connections. I am still awaiting that summons, just as some of my colleagues are awaiting similar summonses from Martin McGuinness. I know that some Cabinet Ministers are in the same position. They seek to use the British law to browbeat those of us who would expose their duplicity.

Why am I concerned about the working of the public order order? As one who co-operated with the police through the years and would still seek to co-operate with them and abide by the law, I believe that, when the law is not equitably and impartially administered, someone has to challenge it.

Article 7(1) of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 states:

"A person who for the purpose of preventing or hindering any lawful public procession or of annoying persons taking part in or endeavouring to take part in any such procession hinders, molests, obstructs or acts in a disorderly manner towards, or behaves offensively and abusively towards, those persons or any of them shall be guilty of an offence."

Article 20(1) states:

"A person who by sitting, standing, kneeling, lying down or otherwise conducting himself"—

no doubt reference to "he" or "him" would also include "she" or "her"—

"in a public place, wilfully obstruct or seeks to obstruct traffic or wilfully hinders or seeks to hinder any lawful activity shall be guilty of an offence."

In a written answer on 19 November 1996 to a question tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), the following figures were given: from 27 April 1987, five people were charged with obstruction under article 20(1); in 1988, 21 were charged with obstruction under article 20(1); in 1989, none was charged; in 1990, one was charged with obstruction under article 20(1); in 1991, one was charged with endeavouring to break up a lawful procession under article 7(1); in 1992, none; in 1993, none; and, in 1994, none.

The figures for the latter three years are interesting, because the Drumcree service was held as usual. The Drumcree Faith and Order group held a tea party to protest and express its views—it has a right to protest peacefully, and I would be the last person to deny anyone that right—but a strange thing happened. Certain republican hoodlums attacked the factory that had been leased to the group at a peppercorn rent for youth and community activities. As a result, the tea party was not held in subsequent years and there were no problems.

In 1995, the McKenna element began its work to disrupt a lawful procession. On the Ormeau road, the residents went to law three times to ask that the parade be ruled unlawful and therefore banned. The judge was not sure why anyone would want to walk down that road, but he ruled that the assembly was lawful. However, the people on that section of road, led by Rice, cleverly manipulated the police with the threat of violence, so that the police stopped a lawful procession because they feared public disorder. No one was brought before the courts for obstructing a lawful procession. Rice was able to say to the police and others, "We never stopped you coming down. It was the police."

Then we had the famous television coverage of the No. 10 district going down the Ormeau road. Ulster Television was the only company up front enough to show the mob on the house tops aggravating the parade and waving the tricolour. By and large, the parade passed down the road in good order. One incident occurred, which was later highlighted, when a man was shown apparently giving a five-fingered salute. It was alleged by the Sinn Fein propaganda machine that the man was referring to the murder of five innocent people at Sean Graham's bookies shop. What was the story behind that? As the man was walking in the procession, two of the republican bystanders said to him, "We know where to get you." That unemployed Protestant, walking in the procession, and the two Roman Catholics—I presume—on the footpath signed on at the same exchange. The man's response was to hold out his hand and say, "Forget about it." That was the five-fingered salute.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): I thank my hon. Friend for explaining why the image that the media projected about those five fingers was entirely inaccurate. The presentation of that event contrasts with the media's total failure to report an incident that occurred during the funeral of the Shankill road bomber, who was responsible for the death of nine innocent civilians in Frizzell's fish shop. People in the funeral cortege passed the bottom of the Shankill road waving nine fingers in the air. One of them shouted up at the Shankill road people, "We can't kill enough of yous." That was not reported in the same way.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I confirm what my hon. Friend says, and it is one of the reasons why I prefer to do live interviews. I can be held responsible for any gaffes I make, instead of facing editorial misrepresentation that is done to distort or to get headlines.

I recognise the causes of public disturbances, but I indict successive Governments, from 1968 onwards, who have failed to grapple with the problem of organised terrorism. They have allowed it to grow and menace a whole society. It still menaces us. People talk about the peace process, but there has been no peace process. Thankfully, there has been a political process that has tried to develop democratic structures in Northern Ireland, but the so-called peace process has been a charade. From the beginning, Sinn Fein-IRA have not gone down the road of peace. I prophesy that, in six or nine weeks' time, depending how long it takes to make the decision about a ceasefire, the present Prime Minister—like the previous Prime Minister, who was put under pressure by the great and the good throughout the world—will be pressurised to accept that the ceasefire is real, without any weapons being handed over and with no evidence of sincerity.

I cannot accept the concept of chastising law-abiding people because others have broken the law. When the House, in its wisdom, passed the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, some 11 of us took a peaceful walk from city hall to the nearest police station to protest the order's denial of civil liberties. The law book was thrown at us. On another occasion, I was indicted for organising and taking part in what was called an illegal procession—I did not realise that walking down the road was necessarily illegal—but we won the case. On the occasion when we were convicted, we did our time. Admittedly, we received short sentences, but we have a criminal record because we stood by our convictions, as is only right when dealing with the liberties of our people.

Residents groups continue to plan counter-demonstrations across Northern Ireland that are contrary to the order, but few folk have been brought before the courts. Last year, we had a tragic but laughable situation when Brendan McKenna was brought before the courts in June for a breach of the law the previous July. As I understand it, the Director of Public Prosecutions has to decide whether someone has a prima facie case to answer. The DPP can get information only from the RUC—at least, I do not think that the Garda Siochana has a say. The court case was held and one of the witnesses on McKenna's behalf was a senior RUC officer. McKenna was acquitted. How could the RUC give enough evidence to persuade the DPP to prosecute at the same time as a senior RUC officer appeared as a witness for the defence?

[Rev. Martin Smyth]

About a week later, in Londonderry, the drummer of one of the Portadown bands was up before the courts for provocative drumming. I have drums—one is plastic—in both ears, and I wonder how, in this age of heavy metal and other sorts of music, one should define provocative drumming. I can go no further with that case, because I am not sure whether there has been an appeal yet. I know that there was talk of one. Such judgments in the courts cause people to question whether the public order legislation is used properly and effectively. Already this year, a number of lawful parades have been re-routed.

Last year in Castlewellan, on the last Saturday in August, the local preceptory was walking through the village to join the district to go to the Comber rally of the County Down Black. One police officer was there for traffic control. The preceptory was stopped by a cousin of Gerard Rice—it is interesting how these folk turn around—a local man from Downpatrick and six others, and told, "You cannot go any further."

If the Black preceptory had wanted to, it could simply have gone further, but its members accepted the guidance of the police officer. No one has been brought before the court for obstructing a lawful parade. That is the point that I want to make.

I am told that discussions are going on, that approaches have been made and that people spend hours trying to get some understanding. It is to be hoped that that will be possible. None the less, there are several questions that I shall ask the Government.

Why are so few illegal demonstrators prosecuted, when they are clearly in contravention of public order? Why have Government not clearly recognised that parades were trouble-free before Sinn Fein-IRA-fronted groups sprang up across the country? Why have Government not pressed Sinn Fein-IRA to explain more fully Adams's Athlone comments?

Why do Government expect the loyal orders to negotiate with groups that clearly do not wish to reach accommodation, as is demonstrated by their choice of convicted terrorists as spokesmen? In 1995 the then County master of Belfast, Robert Saulters, met Gerard Rice with Quakers and police, and came to an agreement. Saulters stayed by it, but Rice could not stand by his agreement. Why continue to talk to folk who cannot be up front and deliver?

Finally, will the Government now firmly put the focus where it belongs—on those who go to parades not to celebrate their culture and heritage, but to stop others from doing so?

7.41 pm

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): I confess that the temptation to take advantage of the extra time available for the Adjournment debate is great, but I shall not stretch it to the last possible moment. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) on securing the debate. It is especially timely now, and the issues are important. I hope that the Government will examine them carefully and that we shall see significant changes.

There is no doubt that the public order legislation has failed. It was introduced as a result of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and, like that agreement, it has not brought peace, reconciliation or stability. Instead, it has added instability and set people at each other's throats. It has not produced any peace at all.

Like the Anglo-Irish Agreement, that legislation will have to be reconsidered. The Minister might find it instructive to peruse the debates in another place when the Anglo-Irish Agreement was being made. In particular, he should read the contribution of Lord Mason, who was probably the most distinguished and effective Secretary of State for Northern Ireland there has ever been.

If the Minister does that, he will see that Lord Mason accurately anticipated the problems that would flow from the Anglo-Irish Agreement in terms of interference with the traditions of Northern Ireland and with the traditional celebration of the culture and identity of its people, especially those who identify with the British tradition. It would be instructive for anyone to read that contribution and to see how prophetic Lord Mason's words were. Changes need to be made.

The problem is not new: it has arisen many times before. People who examine its history through the statute book will see that there is legislation on the subject going right back to the 19th century. At one point there was even an attempt to solve the problem by banning all parades—the party processions Acts.

Party processions legislation remained on the statute book for many decades of the 19th century. There is an interesting parallel with what my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South has argued, because not only was that legislation wholly ineffective; it was applied unequally. There was discrimination right at the roots of the operation of the legislation in the middle of the 19th century.

The legislation was enforced against the Orange Order but not against the nationalists. That is what one finds again and again. For many years throughout the middle of the 19th century, nationalist parades in breach of the legislation were ignored, whereas any attempt by Orangemen to parade in breach of the legislation was subject to penalties.

The same is true of the public order legislation. Illegal activity by nationalists is ignored and charges are not brought. Indeed, in a perverse way, assistance is given by the authorities to nationalists acting illegally in contravention of the Act. Conversely, the legislation is used against people who by their nature, habits and background are peaceful law-abiding citizens who are not causing trouble, people who represent the backbone of their community.

That important point should be more widely appreciated in this part of the United Kingdom. When one is dealing with the loyal orders, one is dealing not with a mere small section of society and a possible hooligan element—there are hooligan elements in society in all places, and they are present in Northern Ireland too—but when one is dealing with the parades of the loyal institutions, one is dealing not with the hooligan element but with people who are the backbone of their communities; people who uphold the traditions and values of society. It is their commitment to the values and traditions of society that, uniquely, leads them into such institutions. That point should be more widely appreciated.

Of course, I have a particular interest in such matters. Fate has it that an incident in my constituency is the focus of attention, but that is not entirely a matter of fate.

As my hon. Friend said, it results from the calculation of Sinn Fein-IRA. He described how Mr. Gerry Adams boasted last year how he and his activists had put in the work over time to create that situation.

As we watched events last year, it was interesting to see how the republican movement teed up several parades with a view to causing trouble—the Whiterock parade in Belfast, the north Belfast parade known as "the tour of the north", and a parade in Newry. For those, and a few others, Sinn Fein-IRA made preparations. They could have selected any one of them to put their effort into. It was their choice to try to cause trouble in my constituency rather than elsewhere.

We know some of the reasons Sinn Fein-IRA did that. They believed that the loyalist ceasefire was weaker in that area, and they had good reason to believe there were people in loyalist paramilitary groups there who were not committed to it. They thought that they could provoke those people into action.

We are thankful that, leaving aside one highly regrettable incident—the murder of Mr. McGoldrick—the attempt to provoke the loyalist paramilitaries into violence was not successful, but now I see that Sinn Fein-IRA are coming back with renewed efforts to try to provoke them again, with the murder of two policemen in Lurgan the other Monday. That too, no doubt, was intended to provoke paramilitary reaction.

Now I shall focus upon what has happened in my constituency in connection with the Drumcree church service. There is not enough appreciation here of the considerable efforts that the local leaders of the Orange Order have made over the past year to explain their position to as wide a range of persons as possible and to ensure that they do everything possible to defuse any confrontation and probable trouble. Their efforts include, of course, coming here to meet a wide range of hon. Members. Their efforts are not widely appreciated.

The House may be unaware that the Orange Order took the extraordinary step of writing a letter to every resident adjoining the Garvaghy road—nationalist and Unionist—to explain its position. The letter was widely praised and is fairly well known in Northern Ireland because it was reprinted in the press, but its terms may not be familiar to the House. I want to put some extracts of the letter on the record. Representatives of the County Armagh Orange Order wrote:

"This is a sincere and genuine attempt to deal with the many misconceptions concerning the walk and there are a number of points we would like to make for your information:

1. The service on the first Sunday in July is partly to remember those who died at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. We pay tribute to all those of both communities who died for the cause of peace and justice.

2. The Orange Order is traditionally a parading organisation. We see our parade as an outward witness to our sincere belief in the Reformed Faith. For that reason, we see attacks on our parades as both a denial of civil liberties and an attack on our religion . . .

3. In the interests of harmony, mutual respect and reconciliation the Orange Order has acknowledged objections raised by the Nationalist community and has already implemented the following principles for the Drumcree Church parade:

a. The number of parades in the area has been reduced from ten to one in the past ten years.

b. Only members of Portadown District parade.

c. No bands take part which could be perceived as antagonistic to our Nationalist neighbours. Accordion bands lead the parade playing hymn music that is common to both traditions.

d. The Orangemen walk four abreast so that the walk will pass any one given point in less than five minutes.

e. The Order marshals and disciplines its own members to ensure there will be no confrontation on our part. If this was reciprocated, then there would only be a need for a minimal police presence.

f. The right to walk peacefully and in a dignified manner and the right to protest in a peaceful and dignified manner should not be denied to anyone.

It is the sincere hope of the Orange Order that the vast majority of the people of Portadown will work together in a new spirit of tolerance to defeat extremists who want confrontation this Summer."

That letter was well received by residents of the Garvaghy road, the general community in Northern Ireland and by many commentators.

Brendan McKenna, to whom reference has been made, is the spokesman for what is called the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition and was largely responsible for a reply, which was publicised. It was of a very different tone and character. Instead of engaging with the conciliatory nature of the Orange Order, his letter was more querulous and demanding. In particular, it referred to the unfortunate murder of Mr. McGoldrick in 1996 and the alleged triumphalism of the Orange Order and others.

I find the reference to murder interesting, in that Mr. McKenna did not take account in his missive of the murders which have occurred closer to Garvaghy road. It is not widely appreciated that, during the troubles, there have been a number of murders in Garvaghy road of Unionists and Protestants by nationalists. The road that is now the cause of dispute originally moved through an entirely Unionist area. The population living adjacent to the road was overwhelmingly Unionist in its political persuasion.

In the early 1970s, a number of public authority housing estates, such as Churchill Park, were constructed. They originally had a mixed population but, as the troubles developed, that ceased to be the case and they are now almost overwhelmingly nationalist. One of the factors that led to the Unionist exodus from the area was the violence directed against Unionists, and the murders, for example, the murder of Mr. Paul Beattie, shot dead near his home in Churchill Park in 1972; or Mr. Roy Rutherford, killed by a booby-trap bomb at the Moy road end of Garvaghy road in May 1973; or Mr. Eddie Clayton, killed by a booby-trap bomb attached to his car on 6 March 1975; or Mr. Robert McNally, killed by a booby-trap bomb which exploded in West street after he had left his home in Woodside Green in the Garvaghy road in 1979; or Mr. John Truckle, killed by a bomb in Woodside Hill in 1983; or Mr. James Wright, killed by a booby-trap bomb in Corcrain—close to Corcrain Orange hall, which has been repeatedly vandalised and regularly burnt—in 1989.

Another part of the background is the continuing abuse and intimidation of Unionists who want to reside in the area. This was brought home vividly to me while I was canvassing in the area prior to the recent general election. I visited a street, the inhabitants of which were—only a few years ago—almost entirely Unionist voters. As a result of republican pressure, most have left. Only about 25 per cent. of the street's inhabitants are Unionists, and those residing there are not having a happy time. One of them said to me, simply, "Our lives here are hell." That hell has been created by the associates of Brendan McKenna.

[Mr. David Trimble]

That is part of the reason why there are strong feelings in the area. The brethren in Portadown perceive the attack on the parade as part of a campaign to drive all Unionists from the area to create a sectarian ghetto that will be 100 per cent. nationalist, so that the republican movement can operate at liberty within the community and use it as a base from which to attack and intimidate the rest of the town. That is a significant factor.

The letter from the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition referred also to the alleged triumphalism of the Orange Order. I will not go into the incidents which it alleged to be triumphalist, but I wish to contrast them with the behaviour of Mr. McKenna himself. He was elected as—allegedly—an Independent Nationalist councillor to Craigavon council in the local elections towards the end of May. After his election, he and his associates formed a cortege and drove down one of the main roads in the centre of Portadown with Irish tricolours flying.

The cortege drove up Garvaghy road and around local streets several times in the small hours of the morning. That involved driving through the part of Garvaghy road and Park road that is Unionist. They drove through that area with their tricolours waving and their car horns sounding at 2 o'clock in the morning. Some local residents came out to protest—vigorously, I must add—and were met with cries from the McKenna cortege of, "You will be burnt out before July." The threat was followed by attacks on subsequent nights on the homes of local people to intimidate them.

Not content with that, the cortege drove past Drumcree parish church and along the Dungannon road to the M1 motorway—a distance of some five miles—through an area that is wholly Unionist. When they reached the roundabout, they contented themselves with breaking the windows of the local Methodist church. This behaviour could not of course be triumphalist and would not attract the attention of the media—nor has it.

I go into the details because it is important that people know the details of the background before they make judgments. If they feel like making judgments, let them bear in mind the conciliatory approach that the Orange Order has taken and the way in which it is trying to reach out to people to increase understanding and to ensure that no valid complaint can be made about its behaviour and to find out if we can move forward positively. There is that desire, not merely within the Orange Order but more widely throughout the Portadown community—I am sure that that includes the greater number of the people in Ballyoran and Churchill Park along the Garvaghy road. We are dealing with a small group of people who are deliberately manipulating the problems and the emotions to which those problems give rise to try to destabilise society and plunge it into disorder. It is claimed that those people are not, as alleged, Sinn Fein. We say that there is Sinn Fein orchestration behind the operation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South referred to some of the personalities concerned. There are three principal, so-called residents groups—one for the Lower Ormeau road in Belfast, one for the Bogside in Londonderry and one for the Garvaghy road in Portadown. The people who front those organisations have clear associations. Mr. Gerard Rice, who is the spokesman for the Lower Ormeau residents group, served a four-year prison term for IRA membership and possession of weapons, which clearly demonstrates his background and allegiance. The spokesman for the Bogside residents group, Mr. Donncha MacNeilis, has been convicted of IRA membership and arms possession and is the son of a Sinn Fein councillor on Derry city council. As for Mr. McKenna himself, he was gaoled for six years in 1982 for his part in a bombing in Portadown and received sentences for firearms offences, false imprisonment and hijacking, being one of two masked terrorists who held a Churchill Park family hostage for three hours while their car was stolen and used in a bombing—the bombing of the Royal British Legion hall in Portadown. It was clearly an attack on the British identity, but it is interesting to note his selection as spokesman for the Garvaghy road coalition. I am sure that when that selection was made it was thought that his record in bombing the Royal British Legion was appropriate because, by tradition, the Portadown Orange district processions are always led by the ex-service men's lodge. It was felt appropriate, no doubt, to have someone whose record was bombing a Royal British Legion hall to cause the maximum offence to an organisation that gives former service men pride of place in its activities.

I hope that problems of that nature will be resolved. I hope that the desire for peace of the greater number of people in Northern Ireland will be respected. I hope that we will see better quality decision making from the police and others on this problem.

Over and above all of that, we also need changes in the legislation. We put those points firmly to the North committee. Unfortunately, its report did not reflect the points that we made. The structure of the public order legislation exacerbates the situation. By appearing to cast on the police an obligation to stop a parade if violence is threatened if it should go ahead, the legislation ensures that any group that threatens to block a parade—using violence to do so—has its desire carried into effect. The structure of the legislation assists groups that want to destabilise the situation by attacking traditional parades. That aspect must be studied. We must move away from these competitions—as it were—to see who can muster the larger crowd to determine the police decision. In some cases, it appears that the decision depends on which group has the larger number of protesters assembled. That is not a satisfactory way to deal with the matter.

The right to assemble and to freedom of movement ought to be respected, particularly in regard to traditional activities of a largely religious and cultural nature. Distinctions could be drawn between religious and cultural activities on the one hand and party political activities on the other. They could also be drawn between what is part of the accepted custom and practice of the community and what is introduced as a new event to provoke trouble or to depart from that established custom and practice. Those are the factors that ought to be embodied in the legislation.

Of course we hope that there will be consensus in the community on the issue, which would help to support such legislation and make it effective. The Government have to do something more, however, than simply sit back and say, "It's up to local people to solve the problem." The Government have a responsibility and I am glad to see that the Secretary of State is doing what she can in that respect, but she is not tackling the root of the problem. Simply going to each trouble spot and hoping

that one can patch the problem up there will not solve it. The armed conspiracy that lies behind it can move to and create other situations. We shall solve this not by chasing to one hot spot after another, but by realising that we are dealing with an armed conspiracy that is manipulating the situation and by ensuring that our legislation and practices do not assist such a conspiracy and give it more tools with which to destabilise society.

8.5 pm

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): I welcome this opportunity to debate parades in Northern Ireland. I make no apology for belonging—like many others in my constituency—to the Orange Institution. Furthermore, I believe that some of the best people in Northern Ireland—some of the most honest and most respectable citizens—belong to that institution. We do not have to apologise for being members. Republican propaganda would taint us as bigots, but we certainly are not.

Many of the Orange Institution's members have given noble service in the part-time security forces protecting the people of Northern Ireland. Indeed, history shows that many members of the Orange Institution played a noble part in the two world wars of 1914–18 and 1939–45.

The object of the Orange Institution is to show loyalty to Her Majesty the Queen. Of course, IRA-Sinn Fein want to paint the Orange Institution black with their propaganda campaign. I want to remove some of the mists from the organisation. The Orange Institution does not march through Roman Catholic estates. Of necessity, when walking a public highway, it has to march past Roman Catholic estates, but it is not the practice of the institution to march through the estates and give offence.

Over the years, because of changing populations, changes have taken place in the Orange Institution's parades. There used to be a parade up Castle street in Omagh, but it does not now take place. There used to be an Orange parade through that most republican village, Carrickmore, but it does not now take place. Due to reasonableness and understanding and the changes in population, many changes have taken place by normal agreement.

There is now a deliberate attack on the marches of the Orange Institution; that is a direct attack on our Protestant ethos and culture. I have personal experience of the situation in my constituency, because each year two Orange lodges get together and march through the village of Mountfield to the local church, where they have a religious service, and then walk back again. They walk respectably, in order and peaceably, and over the years there has been no trouble in the village.

This year, because of events elsewhere in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein and the IRA have discovered that if they gather a crowd and threaten to sit down in the road, the police, rather than allowing the parade to go ahead, will stop it and do nothing about the Sinn Fein-IRA sympathisers. Last Sunday, the IRA-Sinn Fein trick meant that the Orange parade never got to the church; it was stopped.

The police interpretation of paragraph 4 of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 in such a situation can only be perverse. Surely the order is intended to operate only if the parade is the cause of serious violence. Surely the police should reroute the parade only if the behaviour of those on the parade necessitates it. It is perverse to argue that if a third party blocks the parade, it is the parade that should be stopped. People's legitimate rights are done away with, as on Sunday, when the Orangemen did not get to their church.

The police of course say that they have stopped the parade to prevent a breach of the peace, but surely anyone blocking the road to stop a parade is committing a breach of the peace. Surely the police are duty bound in that situation to prevent that, and to clear the roadway, so that those who are legitimately, lawfully and peacefully marching can go about their business. The Minister should consider the order again, and if the interpretation is not clear it should be altered to ensure that people have the right to march peaceably along the Queen's highway.

What is the point of 21 days' notice in relation to Orange parades? In the English legislation, there is no need to give notice for parades that are traditional, regular and yearly. If the police are doing their job and know anything about the community in which they operate, they will know about the Orange parades that take place annually.

The chief of police says that he welcomes the Parades Commission, and that decisions about parades should be taken out of his hands and given to a third party. Surely the fact remains that ultimately the police are responsible for law and order. To try to give the responsibility for public order to a third party is ridiculous, because the commission knows little about the various areas of Northern Ireland.

The commission will take advice from many different people, and we can rest assured that on some occasions its decision will be ridiculous. Only the local police know the exact circumstances, and it is up to them to take the decision. The commission will say that a parade is to be stopped, and the police may find that they cannot stop it; or the commission will say that a parade is to go ahead, and Sinn Fein-IRA will try to stop it, so the police will have to enforce a decision that they did not make and might not agree with. They will have to police the situation, and if they do not do what the commission says, they will be called the worst thing in the world.

Furthermore, many decisions in Northern Ireland go up the line to the Chief Constable. Often, the recommendation of the local police is not accepted, and what the local police commander who is active on the ground would like to do and considers reasonable is countermanded by his chief, away up at headquarters. That is intolerable because, as I understand the law, the commander on the ground at the time has to make the decisions and is responsible for them.

There is no doubt that the iniquitous Anglo-Irish Agreement has had a detrimental effect on decisions on Orange Order parades and that the Irish Government have put pressure on the British Government and the Northern Ireland Office to ban certain parades. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the Chief Constable is open to such political interference. The Chief Constable is ultimately responsible for security and for taking the decisions; he should not be moved by political interference.

The Secretary of State seems to be travelling around and talking to this person and that, to one side and the other. Surely that is a very foolish exercise for a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Whatever decision she makes, or the police make, she will be accused of being on the wrong side.

[Mr. William Thompson]

Surely the Secretary of State's responsibility should come into operation only when she is asked by the Chief Constable to ban a parade. Surely going around in such negotiations prejudices her role. She has the obligation before making such a decision to consult the police authority; can we take it that she will do that?

The parades issue in Northern Ireland is very emotive and serious. The activities of the police mean that they are beginning to lose the support of the Protestant and loyalist population of Northern Ireland. When lawbreakers come out to stop a parade, it is unacceptable that the police, instead of directing their Land Rovers at those who are breaking the law, aim and face their Land Rovers against the lawkeepers. That causes great anger in the Protestant, Unionist, loyalist population. As this year's season continues, I hope that things will go peacefully. I hope that if the law is properly enforced, we can find peace in these difficult times.

8.20 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): It has been a long debate—longer than many of us expected.

Mr. Trimble: The Minister has two hours.

Mr. Ingram: I might just take that long if I thought that the hon. Gentleman would miss his flight.

Mr. Trimble: I have missed it already.

Mr. Ingram: The hon. Gentleman has missed it already.

I join the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) in congratulating the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) on obtaining this debate, which has been helpful. The hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) made his maiden speech earlier, and has now made another. If he makes a habit of that, we will never get home.

As Minister responsible for security matters and economic development, I should perhaps take issue with the opening remarks of the hon. Member for Belfast, South. It is not the purpose of this debate to deal with the economic consequences of public disorder, but I take issue with some of his conclusions about the impact on the tourist sector in Northern Ireland.

There is clear evidence that, while there was a very positive upsurge during the ceasefire, it has gone into serious decline. That causes unemployment and major problems in the rural areas of Northern Ireland. We should all take stock of that. It is difficult to achieve significant job investment in Northern Ireland while there are problems of serious disorder. The figures point to that.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I agree with the Minister, but, as I said to Secretary Ron Brown, when he came with President Clinton, some American and other companies invested in Northern Ireland in the worst possible times. Companies could learn to invest in the best possible times. We should not give credibility to those who are trying to destroy the economy by highlighting the problems to our American and other friends who came in when things were much worse.

Mr. Ingram: This debate is not about the economic impact of public disorder, which we shall have other opportunities to debate. I know that hon. Members want as many jobs as possible brought to Northern Ireland, not only to their constituencies but to all parts of Northern Ireland. That is the task with which I have been charged, and I hope to work with them in future. I share the sentiment that we should not talk up the worst scenario, but should remember that bad scenarios affect those who make investment decisions. Sometimes we know only what we win, and not what we have lost as a result of past activities.

The issue raised by the hon. Member for Belfast, South is clearly important because of the many worries that exist in Northern Ireland. I am genuinely grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to set out in detail the nature and extent of public order legislation as it applies to Northern Ireland. I would also like to deal with the actions being taken by the Government, and particularly by the Secretary of State, since she was mentioned in the debate, in seeking an accommodation and a resolution of the extremely difficult problems and differences between certain sections of what many rightly consider to be the deeply divided community of Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for Belfast, South also raised specific matters relating to the application of the law as it stands in articles 7 and 20 of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987. He mentioned two specific cases with which I shall deal later. Let me set his remarks in context with specific reference to the legal framework within which the forces of law and order operate in Northern Ireland.

I am sure that the hon. Member for Belfast, South agrees that, in any democracy, it is a fundamental right for people to be able to express their views publicly. That right, however, is conditioned by the need to behave responsibly and to be conscious of the rights of others likely to be affected by the public expression of the views in question. In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the legal framework within which those rights are mutually protected is set out in the public order legislation determined by this Parliament.

That legislation provides that, so long as serious public disorder is not expected to cause serious damage to property, or serious disruption to the life of community, or intimidation of others, public demonstrations, parades or marches are lawful. In essence, the law allows people a right to peaceful protest or demonstration of views, but each side must behave responsibly and consider the other.

Unfortunately, in Northern Ireland there are people intent on violence, confrontation and disorder. There can be no question but that many of the scenes witnessed last year, particularly around the time of the parade in Drumcree in July, were the deliberate work of people wishing to cause disruption.

Mr. Thompson: Will the Minister confirm that the law breaking and intimidation must result from the parade itself before it can be re-routed or banned by the police?

Mr. Ingram: Of course, there are many aspects of the legislation that are brought into play in making a

determination. The hon. Gentleman commented on the role, function and powers of the Chief Constable. He makes his judgments, based on the law that he has to operate. That is the basis on which decisions are taken, and taken often with the co-operation and accommodation of those seeking to march and parade.

My point was that the scenes we witnessed last year, particularly around the Drumcree events in July, were the deliberate work of people wishing to cause disruption. I am sure that all hon. Members agree that there can be no excuse for such violent behaviour, then or at any time, no matter from which source it comes. The sad fact is that the Royal Ulster Constabulary is all too often caught in the middle. All of us, whether Members of Parliament or people who participate in community life in Northern Ireland, must do all we can to support the RUC and others who act in support of it.

Hon. Members know that public order legislation in Northern Ireland provides for a number of offences for those involved in confrontations such as those we witnessed last year. They include specific offences of, for example, provocative conduct and obstructing a lawful parade, as well as the offence of disorderly conduct. It is, of course, a matter for the police and the Director of Public Prosecutions to come to decisions on prosecutions.

I hope that the hon. Members for Belfast, South, for Upper Bann, and for West Tyrone accept the Government's assurances that the police are determined to keep the peace and see the rule of law prevail. Those engaged in violent protest should expect to face the full rigour of the law. That is the overriding objective of the Government.

Under existing legislation, the RUC is not empowered to make decisions on whether to allow parades to take place. However, legislation does allow the RUC to place conditions on a parade and to order its re-routing if, on grounds of public order implications, it is considered necessary. Experience has shown that the RUC makes every effort to exercise its best judgment in dealing with contentious parades. Every year, there are many hundreds of parades of all types, the vast majority of which pass off peacefully.

In the short time that I have had ministerial responsibility for this matter, I have been encouraged to note that, of almost 900 parades this year, only one has been classified by the RUC as disorderly. The Government welcome the co-operation given by parade organisers to the RUC when some parades have had to be re-routed. Such co-operation can be seen only as a positive sign for the future.

The ultimate sanction of banning a parade rests with the Secretary of State, and that would be exercised only when all attempts at accommodation and resolution have failed. That said, the serious disturbances surrounding contentious parades in Northern Ireland over the past two years led the last Government to appoint an independent review team, headed by Dr. Peter North, to examine the whole question of parades and associated public order issues.

The North report brought a welcome degree of fresh thinking to this contentious area. It recognised that a more structured and broadly based system was needed to encourage the local accommodation of difficulties on parades. It clearly acknowledged that the right of free association is fundamental in a free society, but it recognised also that that right is not absolute.

The report suggested that an approach based on compromise, mutual respect and recognition of the rights, viewpoints and sensitivities of others offers the best way forward where disputes occur. The review team consulted widely, taking careful account of the rights of both sides, and maintaining as a central consideration the need to avoid providing any incentive for those involved to provoke or threaten disorder.

The hon. Member for Upper Bann suggested that the current public order legislation provides an incentive to disorder. The North report recognised that danger. Its recommendations seek to tackle it, giving the Parades Commission the power to take account not only of the wider impact of a parade on relationships within the community but of the past behaviour of both sides—marchers and protesters—in reaching its final decision. The aim is that those who seek to use force to get their way will be penalised, not rewarded, for their actions.

Several of the report's recommendations have already been put in place. The Parades Commission was established in March under the chairmanship of Mr. Alistair Graham, and is pursuing vigorously its current remit of mediation, conciliation and education. In addition, the passage of the Public Order (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order has extended the required notification period for a parade to 21 days and imposed new controls on the consumption of alcohol by those associated with such parades.

The Government are committed to implementing the remaining recommendations of the North report as soon as possible. Hon. Members will be aware that it was announced in the Queen's Speech that the Government will introduce a Bill in the autumn to do this. The Government intend to have the legislation, and the systems and structures that flow from it, in place in good time for next year's marching season.

That will place the Parades Commission on a statutory footing and give it a range of specific functions. Among those will be a duty to promote greater understanding by the general public of issues concerning public processions, and to promote and facilitate mediation as a means of resolving disputes.

Where mediation has not led to a local accommodation, the Parades Commission will be able to make determinations on particular parades, having taken into account all the relevant factors. As recommended by the North report, the Secretary of State will be able, if asked to do so by the Chief Constable, to review any determination by the commission. Moreover—this goes to the heart of some of the points raised by hon. Members—on the day, the police will retain their common law powers to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent public disorder.

The Government are keenly aware of the fears and sensitivities that those issues arouse on all sides. We are therefore determined, in taking forward legislation to provide new powers for the Parades Commission and the new framework for handling parades, to recognise some of the concerns that have been expressed this evening.

That is why we are proceeding by way of primary legislation, rather than by Order in Council. In the previous debate, concern was expressed about how some legislation has been dealt with through Order in Council.

[Mr. Ingram]

That will not apply to this legislation. That will enable our proposals to be subject to the fullest possible scrutiny by Parliament.

Mr. Thompson: The Minister said that the police would retain their "common law powers". Will they also retain their statutory powers?

Mr. Ingram: I was very specific in what I said. We shall have a full debate when the legislation goes through the procedures of the House. Now that the hon. Gentleman has found his voice and his capacity to intervene in Ministers' contributions to debates, I am sure that he will intervene regularly in my contributions on that subject. I look forward to dealing with him on the detail of that legislation.

In addition to the points that I was making, when the legislation is introduced later this year, it will take full account of the experience of this year's marching season. Importantly, the views of all those involved will be listened to in order to achieve any possible enhancements to the measures that we propose. The Government will be genuinely open to serious proposals on the structure of the legislation, such as to enhance the chances of local accommodation and the workability of the new arrangements. I am sure that hon. Members will make their views known at the appropriate time, when the matter is considered by the House.

The Government recognise that no commission can, of itself, resolve this contentious issue. What is required is a willingness on each side to appreciate where the other side is coming from. All of us in government—indeed, throughout the wider community—must work hard to encourage and facilitate a greater dialogue between both sides of the argument over a parade or demonstration. It is only by sitting down and talking to one another, through intermediaries if necessary, that each side will be able to understand the fears and sensitivities of the other. What is required is understanding and accommodation.

Hon. Members mentioned Gerry Adams's comments about Sinn Fein's objective of stirring up trouble on parades. Clearly, I am aware of those media reports of his alleged comments, and I deplore all such sentiments. The Government's objective is to encourage local accommodation. Such comments undermine that very objective.

Nobody is being asked to set aside their deeply held principles or to deny their culture and traditions, but there is a need to appreciate the other person's ethos and traditions and the importance attached to them. In a free society, we have the right to be different and to celebrate our culture and traditions, provided that we do so within the law, and having regard to the need to avoid giving offence to others.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I appreciate the points that the Minister has been making, and we look forward to a general debate later. Will he bear in mind, however, the fact that, with a bipartisan approach, people may not pay enough attention to the lone voices from Northern Ireland?

The Minister speaks of cherished traditions. Is he aware that the North report, which was given a specific remit concerning parades, criticised the qualifications of an Orangeman and made no reference to the qualifications or doctrinal standards of any other body? Such one-sidedness causes problems. Will the Government guarantee that those who deliberately set out to destroy a particular culture in Northern Ireland—our British culture—will not be allowed, by force of weapons or disruption, to have their way?

Mr. Ingram: The hon. Gentleman does not need to ask the latter part of that question. He knows the determination of this Government and previous Governments to resist the men of violence, from whichever side of the community they come.

With reference to the North report and its comments on traditions and culture, that is an analysis, as opposed to the conclusions on which the legislation will be built. We must deal with the purpose and possible impact of the legislation. The Government believe that the legislation will improve the situation, taking account of all factors.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, which will no doubt be raised during the debate. Let us deal with the substance and purpose of the legislation, and what we are seeking to achieve.

It was mentioned during the debate that the issue of parades in Northern Ireland has considerable potential to polarise opinion and raise community tensions. Of that there is no doubt. There are deeply help convictions on both sides, but we believe that the best way to reduce the tensions and difficulties surrounding parades is through dialogue and negotiation, leading to accommodation at local level.

That is not a question of denying anyone his right. Instead, it is about reaching an acceptable balance. All those with influence—I include the hon. Members—should seek reconciliation, not confrontation.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and others working on her behalf have been tireless in their efforts to achieve such an objective. Instead of the criticisms that have been made tonight, we should all pay tribute to her and the officials who have been meeting all sides to avoid a rerun of last year's disgraceful scenes.

The House will be aware that the Secretary of State has invited both sides involved at Drumcree, which is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Upper Bann, to join her for intensive discussions at Hillsborough castle, in a continued attempt to achieve the local accommodation that all reasonable people in Northern Ireland want.

It is not yet possible to say whether those efforts will have a successful outcome, but I can assure the House that the Government will continue to do all that they can to avoid a repetition of last year's appalling events. I hope that I take with me on that journey the hon. Members—I am sure that I do, and I am sure that the Secretary of State will be able to call on them to use their good offices, when necessary.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I assure the Minister that that would be the desire of each of us. The criticisms levelled at my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) because he used his influence to divert problems last year—to curb extremists—have been perverted by the media to suggest that he was leading them against the RUC. Does the Minister accept that that was not a helpful

representation? If my hon. Friend had not been there, using his energies to do what the Minister has asked us to do, the situation would have been entirely different.

Mr. Ingram: I have made no such criticism. I listened carefully to what was said. The media have a capacity always to play to their own agenda. As we are talking about the impact of the past, I emphasise that we must learn the lessons of the past, but I hope that that can be the forgotten country. Let us look at the point we have reached, and the point that we want to reach in future.

I was setting out the aims that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been trying to achieve by seeking through mediation an accommodation from both sides. It is important to make it clear that the variety of powers available to the Chief Constable and the Secretary of State under the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order will be exercised in full, if need be. That situation has not yet been reached. I ask all hon. Members who have any influence to bring to bear on the matter that they do so in a constructive, not a destructive, way.

The recent exchange of letters between the Orange Order and the residents of the Garvaghy road should be seen as a significant step in the right direction. The hon. Member for Upper Bann referred to the letter from the Orange Order. Clearly that was a major step forward. I do not want to go into detail, but I would take issue with its total conclusion with regard to the residents' letter, as there were glimmers of hope in that as well. We must always look for ways forward. Clearly, all of us welcome the efforts of the newsletter and the *Irish News* in encouraging people to seek common ground. That was another helpful step forward.

I referred earlier to the fact that the RUC is all too often caught in the middle of public disorder situations, and the need to give the RUC our full support. Unfortunately, we have seen all too clearly the tragic results of the police being demonised by those who cannot accept decisions lawfully taken to prevent public disorder.

The appalling murder of Constable Greg Taylor in Ballymoney was a powerful reminder of what can happen when hatred and violence overpower the normal rules of civilised behaviour. Outright condemnation of such atrocities is required—condemnation without equivocation or rationalisation of the events. I cannot accept that such attacks on police officers or their families are in some way understandable. Such grotesque acts are no more understandable than attacks on the security forces or members of the public by the IRA or any other paramilitary group.

The police are there to serve the entire community. In doing so, they have difficult decisions to make. Although some may not agree with particular decisions, the blunt fact is that, if we truly believe in the rule of law, our reaction to such decisions should be to respect the role and functions of the RUC, as it is acting in a way consistent with the powers given to it by Parliament.

I shall deal with the specific points raised by the hon. Member for Belfast, South when he opened the debate. He will understand that I cannot comment on individual cases that are currently subject to legal process. At an appropriate time, when the legal process has been duly exhausted, I will write to him and to other hon. Members on points raised in relation to specific cases.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Belfast, South for making some of his concerns known in advance. Accordingly, I have been able to investigate the points that he made. He suggested that Mr. McKenna of the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition was prosecuted but acquitted when the police gave evidence on his behalf, or failed fully to carry out their duty.

Mr. McKenna was indeed prosecuted for obstructive sitting, under article 20 of the order in connection with an incident on 9 July 1995. The case was heard at Craigavon magistrates court on 25 June 1996. The police in fact gave evidence on behalf of the prosecution. A magistrate dismissed the case.

The hon. Gentleman also suggested that there is an imbalance in the rigour with which the law is enforced, citing the case of a loyalist bandsman convicted of provocative drumming.

Mr. Trimble *rose—*

Mr. Ingram: I taken several interventions, and now I must get on.

I would strongly contest—

Rev. Martin Smyth: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I know that the Minister is reading from a brief, and I sympathise with him, but someone may be helping him to give wrong information, if not to mislead the House. We must be careful about that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): The Minister must respond in the way that he thinks best. The Chair is not responsible.

Mr. Ingram: Of course I am reading from a brief. The hon. Member for Belfast, South informed me that he would raise specific points, so we have investigated. I am replying according to the advice that I have received. I do not want to go into detail. We are not dealing with a specific case. If hon. Members disagree with the view that I am expressing, let us deal with that by way of correspondence. I am quite prepared to be open about the matter. I do not believe that that was a point of order—it was a specious attempt to intervene.

I return to the issue raised by the hon. Member for Belfast, South in relation to provocative drumming. If I understood him correctly, he said that there was bias in the way in which the police handled the case. If that was the implication, I entirely contradict it. I would argue that the individual in question received a fair trial and was convicted of a serious offence—that is the reality in law.

I turn now to matters relating to articles 7 and 20, to which the hon. Member for Belfast, South referred. In cases where persons were allegedly involved in attempting to prevent a lawful parade, the police may have considered it more appropriate to proceed under article 18, which makes it an offence for persons in any public place to use riotous or disorderly behaviour, or behaviour whereby a breach of the peace is likely to be occasioned.

I accept the hon. Gentleman's point about the number of convictions under articles 7 and 20. I have consulted the answer to the parliamentary question put down by the

[Mr. Ingram]

hon. Member for Upper Bann, and I accept that the number is not high. However, we must recognise that the number of prosecutions for disorderly behaviour is much higher: 1,612 in 1996, and a total of 19,165 prosecutions since the order came into force. That picture is entirely different from the one painted by the hon. Member for Belfast, South.

Hon. Members said that tensions are high in Northern Ireland at present. We all want to see an end to that state of affairs, and we must seek a solution. I have tried to deal with the main issues raised and with two specific issues—we should resolve any disputes that arise elsewhere if need be—and I have set out the context within which the forces of law and order are obliged to operate as they face the current round of marches and parades.

I repeat that my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister urge that common sense should prevail, and that accommodation between the divided communities should take precedence over confrontation. I do not believe that any hon. Member would disagree with that objective. It is what the vast majority of decent people in Northern Ireland want, and nothing less will do.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nine minutes to Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 27 June 1997

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PETITION

Further and Higher Education

9.34 am

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): I wish to present to the House a petition signed by 7,488 students, on the issue of free education.

The petition reads as follows:

The Petition of citizens of the United Kingdom

Declares that education must be free if it is to be accessible to all who may benefit from it, and that, in particular, the abolition of student grants, and the closing of the benefit system to those in further and higher education has excluded many from such education who have the academic potential but not the economic ability.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to address the problem of access to further and higher education as a matter of urgent and high priority.

When I look round the Chamber and see so many hon. Members who have benefited from free education, I know that my colleagues at least will wish to ensure that the generations that come after us have the same opportunities.

To lie upon the Table.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. In light of the article in *The Guardian* today written by the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith), I wonder whether you have had a request from the Secretary of State for Wales to make a personal statement to the House. Things have moved on since the discussion at business questions yesterday, in that the hon. Gentleman has made a specific allegation of a breach of parliamentary privilege and has repeated the allegation that Labour is threatening him and abusing his rights as a Member of Parliament. Have you had any indication as to whether the Secretary of State for Wales intends to say whether the Prime Minister did not in fact give an accurate picture to the House when questioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) at Prime Minister's questions on Wednesday?

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. As you know, I wrote to you yesterday on the same matter. It appears that on Wednesday the Prime Minister defended his Secretary of State for Wales against the allegations that he had threatened the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) for his principled stand on the issue of devolution. Is it possible for the Secretary of State for Wales to make a statement to the House? The issue needs clarifying. During yesterday's business questions, hon. Members asked for a debate on the matter, but the request was turned down by the Leader of the House, who said that the Prime Minister considered the issue closed. Do you agree that the matter cannot be closed until it is resolved, and that there are far too many unanswered questions for it to be closed?

Mr. Livingstone: Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I have made absolutely clear my intention to campaign against the Labour party's position on a mayor for London. I have not been threatened by anyone, and I want to know why some Members are privileged and some are not.

Madam Speaker: In answer to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), his letter is under consideration and he will receive a response to it as soon as I have been able to examine it thoroughly.

I have not seen the article in *The Guardian*, but I shall read it. I have had no indication that a Minister is seeking to make a statement today.

Sport for All

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Janet Anderson.*]

9.38 am

The Secretary of State for National Heritage (Mr. Chris Smith): I welcome the opportunity to open this debate on sport for all. In doing so, I extend a particular welcome to the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr Nicholls) and congratulate him on his new responsibilities.

Sport is a subject that provokes strong feeling in all parts of the House, and I know that today's debate will be lively and far-ranging. I and my hon. Friend the Minister for sport welcome all ideas that support the Government's aim of providing sporting excellence at all levels while increasing sporting opportunities for the many, not just the few. On 21 May, my hon. Friend announced that the Government will take the lead in extending opportunities for participation in sport through a national strategy for sport, which will embrace all sections of the community, regardless of where they live or what their social background, age or ability might be. I want to say more about that today.

Sport for all is a well-known phrase that is applied to a range of initiatives and concepts internationally. I shall define what it is to mean in the Government's policy. My right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Mr. Pendry) laid the foundations in "Labour's Sporting Nation". My hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde has attended every sport debate in the House to date. I know that he is disappointed not to be able to be here today because of a long-standing business engagement.

Sport for all used to be the subtitle for the work of the sports councils. The previous Government abandoned that. We want to put it back at the heart of sport policy. We want to ensure that no one is excluded from sporting opportunity in this country. Some say that we have to choose between aiming for sporting excellence and aiming for sport for all, but the two concepts are complementary and reinforce each other. They are not opposites. The extension of a broad base of mass participation in sport is essential if excellence is to be achieved and elite athletes are to have opportunities in international competitions.

We believe that the concept of sport for all should be wide-ranging, ensuring sporting enjoyment and opportunity for the public at large and focusing on the need to develop sporting talent and invest in the future by supporting sport at grass-roots level.

Sport for all is an ambition that we pursue for the benefit that it can bring in national pride and the inspiration that success, particularly at an international level, can provide. We have all enthused during recent weeks at the success of our national football and cricket teams. The marvellous achievements last weekend of the British Lions and of the British athletes competing in the European cup were enjoyed not only by those who played, or saw the action, but by those who later read or heard about the triumphs of our heroes and heroines.

At the local level, sports opportunities and success create a sense of community. Young people, in particular, gain confidence and self-discipline and are introduced to good habits that set patterns for a lifetime. Children who are introduced to sport at an early age and enjoy it are likely to continue to participate throughout their adult life. It is therefore important that young people in particular are given the opportunity to participate in as many activities as possible—in school time, as part of extra-curricular activities or through school or youth club links.

Team and competitive games have many welcome attributes, but we should not be restrictive or prescriptive about what children and young people learn and play. The development of informal sport and recreation is every bit as important as the development of team sport. That is why useful and healthy pursuits such as rambling, angling, wall and mountain climbing and recreational cycling, which offer immense enjoyment and personal reward, should be encouraged. It is one reason why the Government are committed to introducing in due course a measure to ensure better access as of right to open country, mountain and moorland for the ordinary people of this country. The "Keep Out" notices that litter the roadside across the forest of Bowland, for example, should become a thing of the past.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I endorse much of what the right hon. Gentleman has said about the importance of sport for all. Is he giving a Government commitment to oppose the concept of private property throughout the country?

Mr. Smith: No, of course not. I am giving a Government commitment to the concept of a right to roam on open country, mountain and moorland where no damage is caused to conservation or agricultural interests and where it is coupled with a responsibility of care for the countryside. We set out that sensible approach clearly in our manifesto. We look forward to carrying it out in due course.

As a densely populated nation, we should take the opportunity to enjoy our countryside and water areas, which are especially precious. It is therefore extremely important that the sports councils continue to work with other agencies such as the Countryside Commission, to ensure that outdoor recreation and sport are managed according to the principles of sustainable development. It is equally important that measures for environmental protection, enhancement and management should include the needs of recreation provision. No one knows better the importance of clean and unpolluted water than anglers.

There are two key considerations. The first is encouraging good health and healthy habits for all people. The second is building civic and community values that can contribute to social cohesion and regeneration. Sport for all has a role to play in both objectives.

That is best illustrated by research undertaken on national fitness, which found that 48 per cent. of men and 40 per cent. of women were overweight. Among 16 to 24-year-olds—those in the prime of their life—70 per cent. of men and 91 per cent. of women were below activity levels for a fit and healthy life.

Participation in sport provides not only a health benefit to the individual, but an economic benefit to society in reduced health expenditure and increased productivity. Those figures on levels of inactivity and unfitness should give us serious pause for thought.

Further research suggests that youth crime accounts for approximately 45 per cent. of crimes resulting in a conviction or formal caution. A recent evaluation of a sports counselling programme in West Yorkshire concluded that it had reduced the participants' propensity to take part in crime, with a resulting benefit to society and cost saving for the public purse. For some, it had been a real turning point in their life.

The concept of sport for all will govern and permeate all that the Government do for sport, as well as being the badge for specific policies by which we shall seek to widen opportunity and access. Of course, we must not ignore our responsibility and desire to achieve excellence. We want to ensure that talented individuals at every level have the structure and support necessary to realise their talent to the full. We announced last month that we are committed to the development of a British academy of sport. My hon. Friend the Minister for sport has visited all three shortlisted sites and we are now examining the bids in the light of those visits. We shall make a further announcement on how we propose to proceed in due course.

We shall also be seeking to ensure a co-ordinated approach among the sports councils, to help the achievement of excellence and the development of sport and physical recreation at local and national level, avoiding unnecessary duplication, overlap and waste.

As part of our new approach to sport, we have announced that we intend to look carefully at changes to the way in which the current sports council structures are working, to ensure that they operate more effectively in the best interests of sport. Various views have already reached me on that subject. I am sure that others will follow. I shall listen to them all and to the opinions of Ministers with responsibilities for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland before reaching a conclusion.

The principles of providing wider opportunity and access should not be restricted to those who wish to participate, but must also be extended to those who wish to watch. We have a great tradition in the organisation and running of successful major international sporting events, whether they are annual events such as the lawn tennis championships at Wimbledon or the British Open golf championship, or events such as Euro 96, where we excel when the opportunity arises. Such events help to raise the nation's international profile as well as bringing awareness and support of the sport concerned. They also provide a major boost to the tourism and hospitality industries.

As the House is aware, one of the Government's first commitments has been to provide the strongest possible support to the Football Association's bid for the 2006 World cup. The active encouragement and importance that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister attaches to that are greatly appreciated.

As I have said, the concept of sport for all should be wide-ranging. Therefore, while I recognise the argument that if the pyramid is wide at the bottom, it will be higher at the top, that is not the primary aim of our approach. Any benefits derived in the development of sporting excellence will be complementary to those of widening access and opportunity, which is a worthy purpose in itself. An approach aimed solely at meeting the needs of the elite would fail to recognise the benefits and pleasure that participation in sport and physical recreation bring to large numbers of the population, of all ages and abilities.

More than half the population participate in some form of sport or active recreation at least once a month. The trend of increasing numbers of people participating is continuing but, despite that encouraging statistic, the quality of the activity and the experience needs to be improved. There also remain underlying issues in relation to particular groups within society that need to be addressed.

Dependent on the sport, participation rates are higher among men—at 73 per cent. on average—than among women, at 57 per cent. There is also higher participation by professional workers, at 79 per cent., compared with unskilled workers, at 46 per cent.

I therefore wish to look at what causes individuals to feel alienated, self-conscious, unrewarded or disinterested in sport—where such feelings may prevail, particularly among certain ethnic or religious groups—and at available research into initiatives to help widen access and encourage participation. I am particularly keen to ensure that the special problems that prevent those with disabilities from participating in their sporting interests or watching their favourite star performers are properly addressed—and not only at the elite sporting level.

Available research suggests that merely addressing negative attitudes is unlikely in itself to increase participation. Positive role models and policies that give real encouragement to all, no matter who or what they are, are essential.

We wish to look at those issues further and at the valuable work already being undertaken by the English Sports Council and others. Obstacles to participation apply, for example, in large conurbations and cities, where access to open spaces, playing fields or facilities of the right size or type may be limited. Equally, small village communities and those living in rural areas may suffer difficulties over transport or opening hours.

We want to ensure that every community has access to, or available, as wide a range of facilities as possible, and that the opportunities to use them exist for everybody, particularly for young people. The sports council lottery board, together with local authorities, must surely bear that in mind.

We must not underestimate the importance of sport in the social and personal development of young people, and we must recognise its role in making them feel part of their communities. We shall be looking at ways of building on the work already being done in that respect. Sports initiatives must be sufficiently flexible and imaginative to reduce the drop-out rate from involvement in sport among promising youngsters. That can also help to address the problems of crime among young people, which is often closely linked with social and sporting deprived areas.

On safety and the safety of sporting environments, I am pleased to say that the Football Trust recently benefited from a £55 million funding package, to enable it to continue its vital programme of ground safety and improvement work. That will assist clubs at all levels and will provide safer accommodation for hundreds of thousands of fans across the country. I am grateful to the Football Association and the Premier League for agreeing to match the lottery contribution pound for pound. It is a valuable example of larger football clubs setting out to help smaller ones.

[Mr. Smith]

In creating a welcoming atmosphere for people to watch and play sport, we must work with others to stamp out racism. Racism has no place in sport, and we intend to do all we can to stamp it out. Our proposed task force for football will pay particular attention to the issue of racism in football, and I shall invite the Campaign for Racial Equality to participate in the work of that task force. We are examining options for introducing legislative measures to increase the penalties for racist abuse at football matches and for making it an offence for individuals to chant racist abuse.

In the wider context, we must bring down the barriers and end the discrimination that prevent equal access to sport for all and which often result from antiquated rules, regulations and ideology. Fortunately, we are not starting from square one and a firm infrastructure is already in place. Local authority provision, in particular through leisure services and education departments, has always been at the heart of sport for all, in terms of providing facilities for people of all ages and abilities by way of fitness and sports centres, swimming pools, bowling greens and the maintenance of parks and open spaces. Local authorities also supply the personnel to facilitate and promote sport throughout the community.

We are conscious of the crucial role of local authority sports development officers, in working with local schools and clubs to expand opportunities, and we are keen to encourage them. We wish to work in partnership with the local authorities, governing bodies of sport and sporting agencies, to produce an integrated, planned approach to sports provision.

The Government have made it clear from the outset that local decision making should be less constrained by central Government, and more accountable to local people. As part of the process, local authorities will be encouraged to develop and publish leisure and cultural strategies to improve planning and policy making, and to ensure that provision is relevant to local needs. Many local authorities already produce such strategies, but we aim to encourage other authorities to follow the example of the best. We wish to work closely with local government in taking that forward.

The previous Administration broke the formal links between the English Sports Council and local authorities, by disbanding the regional councils for sport and recreation. We are looking at how regional links can best be re-established, so that we can fulfil our commitment to working in partnership with local authorities, governing bodies, the private sector and other agencies to improve sporting opportunities.

We are determined to rebuild the relationships that were once so strong. The role of local government and of local sports organisations must be given credit and challenged to perform at higher levels and supported where possible. I have no doubt that it will be challenging for them. They will have their work cut out to keep up with us and to deliver what the people need from sport, from the people's lottery, and from sport for all.

A further measure to encourage sport in schools and a healthier life style for the nation is to ensure that playing fields that schools and their local communities need are not sold for redevelopment in the future. More than 500 school playing fields were sold off under the previous Government's regime. As the basic facility providers, local authorities need carefully to assess future demand from pupil numbers and the needs of the wider communities before declaring land as surplus to requirements. Together with our ministerial colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment, we have already taken action to stop the unnecessary disposal of school playing fields. We are also considering urgently a wide range of options to ensure that all school pupils and communities have access in the future to proper sports facilities.

The national lottery has contributed to the widespread renewal of the country's cultural and sporting infrastructure. Under the Government's new proposals for the lottery, especially in terms of developing a strategic direction for the deployment of lottery funds, that can be enhanced. To date, the lottery has provided capital funding of more than £630 million to some 3,200 sports award recipients in the United Kingdom as a whole, with some £540 million awarded by the English Sports Council to date. Every county in England has benefited, and soon every town in England will be able to say that it is better off thanks to the lottery sports fund.

Recently, emphasis has been placed on reducing the requirements on schools and areas of deprivation to match funding, and on providing up to 90 per cent. funding from the lottery for specific areas. I very much welcome that new flexibility to narrow the matching funding requirements, especially for small-scale community schemes where it is inevitably difficult to raise private sector funds.

The rules and conditions applied to all lottery sports grants before a scheme is approved, in terms of access without discrimination, special efforts to set up women's and junior sections of clubs, and the general concept of community benefit, are providing greater sporting access and opportunities for all. I am encouraged to hear that the ability to obtain lottery funding has prompted a number of clubs to re-examine their rules and practices to ensure that they are equitable. I hope that the same message might even be received by the Marylebone cricket club.

In addition to capital funding, the first lottery revenue sports grants made under the "World Class" performance programme have been announced. I look forward to the announcement of more awards under that initiative, which will develop excellence at all levels and improve our nation's sporting performance.

We believe that the lottery can do even better, which is why we shall publish a White Paper next month setting out our plans for legislation on the lottery, to ensure that in sport, as elsewhere, there is better strategy and more co-ordination among distributors, and that the money goes where it is needed.

In delivering our objectives, we shall work closely with the sports councils. I have been encouraged to hear that advisory groups of the English Sports Council on race, gender and on people with disabilities are already established to assist the delivery of sport. We shall invite them to propose specific initiatives, which the council can take forward to tackle problems and widen opportunity. We shall also look at how we can build on the Department of Health's programmes, which, informed by medical and psychological opinion, have tended to focus on exercise rather than sport and physical recreation, and on wider issues of public health.

Clearly, an initiative such as sport for all will tie in closely with public health. It is an established fact that people who are physically inactive are twice as likely to get heart coronary disease and three times as likely to have a stroke as people who are active. It is, therefore, in everyone's interest to influence people's knowledge, attitude and behaviour in relation to physical activity. That focus will also link closely with the proposals that will be set out in the national lottery White Paper for funding health and education initiatives, including the development of healthy living centres and out-of-school-hours activities, both of which have strong sports dimensions.

During the run-up to the election, I was interested to visit an imaginative scheme in Tamworth in the midlands, where local GPs can prescribe for their patients not just drug therapies but opportunities to take exercise in the local sports centre, with close co-operation between the medical services and the local authority that runs the centre.

As I said, sport is an essential part of youth development. It is important that all schools provide good-quality, balanced physical education and sports opportunities. Achieving a lifelong habit of sport for fitness and pleasure depends on exposure from an early age to skilled, sympathetic physical education and sports training on safe, well-designed equipment and facilities. A number of initiatives are already under way to encourage that, including the English Sports Council, Youth Sport Trust and local education authority joint initiatives under the TOP programmes. More generally, we wish to continue to promote sport in schools and provide facilities, trained teachers and coaches.

Another initiative, sportsmark, has been developed to recognise schools with especially good provision for physical education and sport. We hope to announce next week the secondary schools that have been successful in achieving a sportsmark or sportsmark gold award. We shall launch a similar scheme for primary schools in the autumn.

I also acknowledge the benefits brought by the community sports leaders award scheme, run through the British Sports Trust, a charity established by the Central Council of Physical Recreation, which receives considerable financial support from the English Sports Council and Hanson plc. Since its launch in 1981, well in excess of 100,000 people have received community sports leadership training to help them develop the communication skills, organisational ability and confidence to lead others in a variety of recreational activities—qualities that benefit society as a whole. Therefore, although a lot is already happening, we could do much more.

I am discussing with the sports councils our ideas and objectives for delivering the wider concept of sport for all. I shall also take the opportunity to discuss how our ideas and objectives link with the objectives and work of the British Olympic Association, in terms of sports associated with the Olympic movement, and of the Central Council of Physical Recreation, which brings many of the sports and physical recreation organisations in this country together. As part of that consultation process, I want to tap the widest possible range of opinion and expertise. We shall hold a conference on sporting access and opportunity at the end of this summer. The Minister for sport and I also wish to continue the visits and meetings that we are already undertaking, at both grass-roots and international level, to ensure that we obtain a broad spectrum of opinion. My aim is for that consultation process to culminate in the announcement of an overall programme of work and other initiatives towards the end of the year.

I hope that today's debate will help in the process of pushing forward the sport for all theme, to ensure that we regenerate sporting activity. I hope that it will help us all to think about how to contribute to a policy of sport for all, so that we can be even more responsive to the sports and recreational needs of local people. The essential vision is clearly in place—that of extending opportunities to participate in sport to all sections of the community, providing excellence at all levels and improving the nation's sporting performance.

That can be achieved only by working in partnership towards those goals. Government, the sports councils, local authorities, governing bodies, the private sector and other interested agencies must all work together for the future of sport and in sport's best interests.

During my seven weeks in office, I have been impressed by the enthusiasm and commitment of those involved in sport, from the grass roots through to the highest level, and at both regional and national level. We need to ensure that the enthusiasm of everyone at all levels of sport is harnessed together, to achieve the benefits and success that we all want to see.

I believe that the agenda that I have set out today will, with the support of the House and everyone associated with sport, enable that to be richly and satisfactorily achieved.

10.10 am

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): I apologise to the House in advance because I shall be unable to stay for the winding-up speeches at the end of the debate. I am due to travel to Hong Kong for the handover process, and the time at which the Government's charter plane leaves requires me to depart from the House before the final speeches.

In view of the recent raids on his portfolio, I congratulate the Secretary of State for National Heritage on appearing at the Dispatch Box. It is a delight to see him, rather than the Minister without Portfolio, here today. But considering the difficulties that the Minister without Portfolio is getting into on the matters that he has raided from the Department, he probably does not want to get too much more into his hands. He might become a Minister with a portfolio, which would be even more dangerous.

In the House, sport has always been dealt with on a broadly bipartisan basis, and I assure the Secretary of State that that will be the approach that my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) and I will pursue while we are in opposition.

I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Mr. Pendry) who, apart from having been some years ago a distinguished Minister dealing with sport, has shadowed the subject for the Labour party for many years and has high credibility in the sporting world. He is held in high regard by Conservative Members who take an interest in such matters, and I share his disappointment that he cannot be

[Mr. Francis Maude]

here today. The hon. Gentleman may be disappointed that he cannot be here on the Front Bench, but the fact that he cannot speak today even from the Back Benches is a disappointment to everybody.

I slightly regret the fact that the Secretary of State made no serious reference to what was done by the previous Government for sport. The furthest he felt able to go was to say that it was advantageous that the new Government would not have to start from square one. As a tribute to the efforts put into promoting sport by the previous Government, that was pretty thin.

I think that it would be widely accepted that no Government, and especially no Prime Minister, has ever given sport such a high priority as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). No Prime Minister has ever put sport so high on his personal list of priorities, devoted so much time and effort to it, or insisted on the Government's putting in place a programme so radical and far-ranging. It would be nice to hear some tribute to that.

The result of my right hon. Friend's tenure of 10 Downing street is that sport is much higher on the political agenda—not the party political agenda, but the agenda for any Government—and politicians now have to take it seriously. I am delighted to hear that, following on in that spirit, the Secretary of State is taking sport seriously, and I hope that that will continue.

The programme put in place by the Conservative Government was far-ranging and highly committed. A great deal was done. That could not have happened without the personal commitment of a series of Secretaries of State for National Heritage. I refer in particular to my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), who was in the Chamber earlier but has to be elsewhere for the time being. He hopes to come back and speak later.

I end my series of tributes with a reference to my friend Iain Sproat, who, as Minister for sport, put a huge effort into raising the profile of sport and extending the commitment to its promotion. It is a sadness to me that we have never managed to coincide in the House of Commons. When he lost his seat, I won; when I lost, he won another; when he lost again, I won again. Sadly, we have never been colleagues here together, but I hope that he will return and we shall at last be reunited.

Iain Sproat was a distinguished Minister for sport and was highly regarded in all the sporting bodies because he took the subject seriously and was not prepared to take no for an answer when there was an objective to be achieved. The fact bears repetition that he could do that only because, as Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon put sport high up the list. I hope that the current Prime Minister, in the midst of all his rushing around and all his other responsibilities, will not allow that to lapse.

In political terms, sport is not always the sexiest of subjects, and for all the splendid energy that the Secretary of State may bring to it, in order to keep it high on the list the Prime Minister will have to put something into it. The past five years have shown how effective that can be, and I hope that it will continue.

One could make a very short speech about sport for all. It is like motherhood and apple pie, in that we are all in favour of it. The question is what one does to achieve it. The Secretary of State set out a number of arrangements, many of which, as he did not feel able to say, but as I shall say on his behalf, had already been put in place by the previous Administration. I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman will not try to overset those arrangements.

The approach has to be made on three levels, the first of which is the grass roots, especially in schools but also in local sporting clubs. Secondly, what has to be and can be done to create winners in sport? Thirdly, what can be done for high-level sport, especially the sports that many people watch?

Spectator sport matters. I know that the debate is principally about participation in sport, but if sport were not accessible and people could not watch it and admire their sporting heroes, they would not be so motivated to take part. It is important to see the three levels as part of a continuum—a whole which cannot be separated.

On the first level, a radical and far-reaching programme was introduced by the previous Government, first set out in the White Paper "Raising the Game". I have here the first annual report on progress, which makes good reading and adds up to a significant programme for the years ahead. Much of that was already in place, and much had been achieved, but there is much more to be achieved. No one suggested for a second that everything could be set up in the first two years.

There is a continuing programme, which involves working closely with schools, local authorities and sporting bodies to encourage more people to take up sport. As the White Paper made clear, particular emphasis is put on opportunities for young people both in and out of school. School is important in this process. Most of us, I suspect, will have played some kind of competitive sport—some of us more competitively and more successfully than others. I was probably in the latter category.

The previous Government had to take the matter seriously because of the years and decades of vilification of the whole idea of competitive sport in schools. It was seen by some, wrongly, to be bad for youngsters to engage in competitive sport. I hope that the Government will join us in saying that that trendy dogma was incorrect. It would be particularly nice to see the Minister for sport here, nodding his head wisely and saying that those dogmas are out of date and unsatisfactory. Competitive sport is good for youngsters. That does not mean that they must be trained to be aggressive, or that that aggression should be transferred into all other areas. I have a lot of youngsters in my household and they are naturally aggressive. Sport is a good way of channelling their aggression and competitiveness in an organised and disciplined framework.

Mr. Chris Smith: I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman that competitive sport is good for youngsters. Does he agree that informal recreation of an uncompetitive nature can also be good for youngsters, and that it is whatever is best and most appropriate for each youngster that matters? Does he further agree that no one should be dragooned into a particular sporting activity that might not be appropriate for that person?

Mr. Maude: I have no problem with that—I am not dogmatic on the matter. Competitive sport is attractive to

many youngsters, even uncompetitive and unaggressive types like me. Competitive sport was not available in many parts of the country for many years, and it was drummed out of the education service by many local education authorities and governing bodies. That was regrettable. I am delighted that we are now back on track with a bipartisan approach and that everyone agrees that access to competitive sport is a good thing.

The White Paper "Raising the Game" set out a 38-point programme to put sport at the centre of school life; to bring good sporting facilities within the reach of every child in every school by 2000—we are on track to achieve that—and to restore the nation's playing fields. I do not dissent from what the Secretary of State said about the many schools and local education authorities that dismantled that heritage. It is important and, once lost, it is not easy to get back. The White Paper set out a clear programme to preserve playing fields "where necessary", as the Secretary of State said. That is a proper qualification and we are all agreed on it.

The White Paper programme included measures to ensure that opportunities for sport after school were available in colleges and universities, and much of that has been put in place. Secondary schools have been able to apply for a sportsmark, and we look forward to those awards. Since last year, the Office for Standards in Education has had the responsibility for inspecting and reporting on games offered as part of the formal PE curriculum. It was important that PE and competitive games became part of the national curriculum, and inspectors will report on extra-curricular sporting provision made by schools. All this helps to raise the profile and to increase the focus by governing bodies, teachers and parents on this area. It is nice to see that get under way.

Other initiatives, such as the pilot coaching weeks for teachers and trainees, have been set in place. I hope that that will develop into a nationwide programme under the new regime in the current year. Schools can claim up to 80 per cent. of the cost of new facilities from the lottery sports fund for projects linked with their communities and sports clubs. Many of us have been troubled over the years by the duplication of facilities between schools and local clubs, and measures which encourage them to work together are welcome. Not all sporting facilities are used all the time and schools and clubs often want to use facilities at different times. All that makes very good sense. It was set out in the White Paper, and I hope that it will continue to be put in place.

We must say a word about the lottery, which has provided the single biggest financial stimulus to the world of sport. Huge amounts have been provided and, in the first couple of years up to October 1996, the national lottery raised nearly £366 million for more than 2,000 sporting projects. That is a major step forward, and no one would argue that, without the lottery being created and without sport being made one of the lottery's five good causes to which proceeds should be directed, that financial support would have been given. It is not just the money from the lottery that matters, but the extra money that the availability of lottery money stimulates.

Other initiatives have been introduced, such as the challenge fund to promote links between schools and clubs, which was established by the Sports Council. One could mention also sportsmatch, the business sponsorship investment scheme for sport and physical recreation, which was launched some five years ago. By last year, it had attracted nearly £30 million in sponsorship, which was matched pound for pound by the previous Government. All those projects are helping to build up a momentum for supporting sport which is highly desirable.

The Foundation for Sport and the Arts—established more or less voluntarily in August 1991—was stimulated by an initiative by the then Government, and has generated large amounts of money. One could point to ways in which some of the extra money might not have been used perfectly, and no doubt people will want to do that from time to time, but my point is that the importance attached to sport has increased dramatically in recent years, and it would be nice if the Government—if only briefly—recognised the commitment, imagination and creativity brought to that process by their predecessors. All of us want the process to be continuous, with as little disruption and point scoring as possible.

Much more is being done, and we are all aware of the programme to create specialist sports colleges and the effect that that will have on clubs. The grass roots are being much better nourished and are now producing sprouts and shoots—or whatever it is grass roots produce.

On the second level—that of training winners and investing in the future sporting heroes of the country—good progress has been made. The national junior sports programme is important, as is the creation of centres of excellence around the country. The most symbolic thing will be the creation of the British academy of sport, and it would be good to hear that the location of the academy will be announced soon. We would like to be reassured that that location will be decided purely on the basis of the right place to create the academy, and not because it makes sense for political reasons.

Mr. Chris Smith: I give the right hon. Gentleman the absolute and categorical assurance that he seeks on that.

Mr. Maude: We will know how much reliance we can place on that, when we know the result. We all look forward to an announcement very soon. *[Interruption.]* I do not want to over-excite Labour Members and arouse their competitive spirit, but we know that three options are available and we hope that the decision will be taken purely on the basis of what is the right place—the place that will provide the best access, not the best stimulus to an area that is important to the Labour party—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] I merely point that out to remind Ministers that that is what we are looking for. I do not think that there is anything offensive in that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage (Mr. Tony Banks): The right hon. Gentleman has had an assurance.

Mr. Maude: And I accept the assurance.

Mr. Smith: I am glad that we have finally got to that point, following the right hon. Gentleman's rather ungracious response to the assurance that I gave. Of course, I can clearly tell the House that the decision will be taken on the merits of the case alone. No partisan political criteria whatsoever will enter into it.

Mr. Maude: We await the result with interest and I hope that it will happen soon so that we can all finally

[Mr. Maude]

celebrate the beginning of this great project, which was very much the personal inspiration of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon and of Iain Sproat, the then Minister for sport.

On the third aspect, high-level sports, it is important to have proper places for important games to take place. Everyone welcomes the decision to go ahead with the new national stadium at Wembley—large amounts of lottery money are involved—and the new stadium in Manchester. That is good and it is investing in the future of British sporting success.

The Secretary of State pointed to the recent successes in a number of sports, which are welcome to us all. British talent has done well so far at Wimbledon; it would be nice if the Government could arrange better weather so that there could be some play. The right hon. Gentleman did not quite claim the credit for all those sporting successes for the Government. It is good to see that success. We all look to see it continuing and we will be the first to blame the Government if that good record begins to come to an end.

What more can be done? On the Government's approach to dealing with the sporting world, it is important that people who give their time freely to sports bodies, putting in huge personal commitment to make them work and to be ambassadors of British sport, are treated reasonably. I think that the Minister for sport probably regrets his unfortunate remarks about Lord MacLaurin, who has a terrific record of support for sporting enterprise and activity in this country. It was a pity that he resigned in that way so soon after the hon. Gentleman made those remarks.

Mr. Banks: It was six of one and half a dozen of the other, if the right hon. Gentleman wants to go for a score draw on that one. Frankly, Lord MacLaurin should not have said those things about the Labour party before the election. If one wants to hold a non-political position, to suggest that the election of a Labour Government would mean the end of civilisation as we know it is probably not a shrewd career move. Lord MacLaurin and I have now established the friendliest and warmest of relationships. We both understand each other fully and will be working very closely together in his speciality area, which is cricket.

Mr. Maude: If Lord MacLaurin understands the hon. Gentleman, he is very much to be congratulated. That is a significant move forward.

It is unfortunate that the Minister for sport reiterated almost word for word the remarks that caused the upset by saying that it was not a shrewd career move for Lord MacLaurin to express political views. How are people to take that? Are they to assume that, if they freely and voluntarily take on heavy responsibilities to promote and be an ambassador for British sport, they are to become politically mute, never to express an opinion because if they do, the Minister for sport will say, "Not a good career move, chum; I'm afraid you haven't got long in that job"? At the end of that episode, the hon. Gentleman said that he hoped to synchronise his mouth and his brain. I hope that that will happen. He must ensure that he does not antagonise serious people who give a lot of time and effort voluntarily because they think that that is right and they believe in the sporting future of their country.

Mr. Banks: I am trying to draw a line under that episode. There are times when people express strong views and then they move on to another relationship and that is exactly what Lord MacLaurin and I have done. It is not a question of people having political views. In effect, Lord MacLaurin was saying—the right hon. Gentleman is almost requiring me to open this up again, but if he wants me to do so I will, as I do not regret anything that I said—that the election of a Labour Government would be a great tragedy for this country. Honestly, if one wants to work with that party in government, that is taking political views too far. I told Lord MacLaurin that to his face and I think that he understands that. He and I speak frankly and I prefer to carry on in that mode.

Mr. Maude: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman does not regret his remarks. He is a grown-up and he is able to conduct his relationship with Lord MacLaurin in whatever way he thinks appropriate. My concern is the message that that sends to a much wider group of people who give their time freely, who think that that matters and who do not want to be told by the Minister for sport that, if they voluntarily accept highly responsible positions in our sporting institutions, they may never express a political opinion again.

It would be nice if the Minister for sport would put the matter to rest, not by opening it up again but by accepting that what he said was wrong and sent an unfortunate message to many people who do not treat sport as a political matter. It would be nice if he learned that, if he wants to continue to get people of that calibre actively involved, he has to be a little more diplomatic.

The announcement by the Secretary of State for Health that he had decided that there would be a ban on tobacco companies sponsoring sport caused great concern in many parts of the sporting world. In this debate, I do not want to get into all the health issues involved and I do not want to get on to the subject of a ban on tobacco advertising. For the moment, I accept that the Labour party made a clear commitment to do that and that it can claim that it has some sort of mandate to do so. There is an argument to be had on the subject and we will have that argument at the appropriate time.

There was no commitment, however, to ban the sponsorship of sport by tobacco companies. The announcement came out of the blue. It was announced not by a Minister who has anything to do with sport, but by the Secretary of State for Health, apparently off the cuff or as a last-minute insert into a speech. It is proper for that decision to be debated here, because it matters—it will make a good deal of difference to the amount of money that will be available to support some important British sporting activities.

The voluntary agreement that comes up for renewal in 1998, I believe, has worked well. It has been capable of being amended over the years to respond to specific concerns that have been raised, and it is tightly drawn and places considerable constraints on what the tobacco companies can do. Some people may be uncomfortable with such sponsorship, but it provides real money for real sporting activities that percolates down into the sports in an important way.

For a ban to be announced in an apparently offhand way, with no consideration of how the sponsorship could be replaced, was unfortunate. I hope that the Minister will say a little more to lay the concerns of sporting bodies somewhat to rest. For example, what is the evidence that the sponsorship at current levels can be replaced at the drop of a hat, and how do the Government expect to prevent international events sponsored by tobacco companies from being broadcast here by satellite broadcasters such as BSkyB? Those are serious questions, and I hope to have a full response from the Minister.

It would be wrong to conclude the debate on sport for all without mentioning a range of outdoor countryside activities that have a high level of participation and involve a wide social mix. The Secretary of State talked about opening access to the countryside. It is somewhat paradoxical that he proposes to force landowners to open their land to apparently unrestricted access for ramblers, while some of his hon. Friends propose to ban traditional country sports—field sports—that landowners support and in which many people participate.

Mr. Chris Smith: How many?

Mr. Maude: The right hon. Gentleman wants to know the figures. He did not mention angling, a traditional country sport in which 3.3 million people participate.

Mr. Banks: We are not talking about angling.

Mr. Maude: Is the Minister saying that it is not a sport? Of course it is a sport: it is a leisure activity, and people take part in it competitively, for heaven's sake.

Mr. Banks: My right hon. Friend did not mention volleyball, either.

Mr. Maude: I am not criticising the Secretary of State for not mentioning angling; I am simply saying that it is ironical that, at a time when the Government are talking about maximising participation in sports, a number of Government Members are proposing to ban a traditional sport in which many people take part.

Mr. Smith: I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman cannot have been paying full attention, because I did indeed mention angling, and in extremely supportive terms. We believe strongly that angling is a sport that should be supported and not condemned; it is enjoyed by millions of people in this country, and long may that continue.

Mr. Maude: It is good to hear the Secretary of State amplifying his comments in that way. We all look forward to hearing the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster), a keen angler, justifying in the debates on his private Member's Bill his continuing support for that sport compared with his attitude toward other country sports, in which apparently the animals' feelings matter rather more.

Field sports are traditional sports with a high level of participation. Last year, for example, more than 700,000 people took part in shooting game and wildfowl, and more than 200,000 people hunted or followed hounds. Those are not, as many Labour Members seem to believe, sports for toffs; they are engaged in by a wide range of people, who feel offended and may not want to take part in more conventional sports.

For a Government who purport to believe in access to sport for all to come along and lend their support—although we are not quite sure whether they are indeed supporting it—to a Bill that will remove people's right to take part in certain sports is ironic. People will sense an authoritarian approach developing, as if we were being told, "Sport's all right as long as I approve of it, but if I don't, you can't take part in it." That is not the way in which such matters should be pursued in the House. There are many unanswered questions.

I welcome the Secretary of State and the Minister to their jobs. We intend to continue to approach sport on a bipartisan basis, but we will ask questions when necessary and hold the Government to their commitment to introduce sensible measures and to support and continue the radical and creative measures introduced by the previous Government. We look forward to hearing the Minister.

10.45 am

Mr. Nigel Jones (Cheltenham): I welcome the Ministers and shadow Ministers to their new positions. I hope that we shall have not only a bipartisan but a tripartisan approach to sport. I am delighted to succeed my hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) as Liberal Democrat sports spokesman, but I cannot and do not pretend to be a sportsman in his class. New Members may not be aware that he held for seven years the Scottish 100 m record of 10.2 seconds on a cinder track and represented Britain at the 1964 Olympic games in Tokyo. By contrast, I bowl slow left arm and hit the ball occasionally with some ferocity but uncontrolled trajectory.

I thank the Secretary of State for his reply yesterday to my question on millennium projects; it has caused some concern to the shadow Secretary of State, because it was answered both by the Secretary of State and by the Minister without Portfolio. I was delighted to get those replies, because I have attempted to table questions to the Minister without Portfolio but they have been bounced by the Table Office on the ground that they are outside his responsibilities.

As a sponsor of the Wild Mammals (Hunting with Dogs) Bill, I can assure the shadow Secretary of State that it contains no provisions to ban angling. There are few people who chase fish with dogs, because fish do not leave any scent in the water.

I share the enthusiasm for sport of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife, and I want to concentrate on three issues. The first concerns the purpose of sport: what should be the aims of sport policy? I agree with a great deal of what the Secretary of State said on that.

The second issue is how we are to achieve those aims. Again, I agree with much of what the Secretary of State intends to put in place, following on from what the previous Government did. We hope that the reviews will bear fruit. The third issue concerns some ways in which we can achieve the aims, perhaps through fiscal measures.

There are two distinct but complementary aspects of sport. The first is to encourage people all over Britain to take up a sport of their choice and improve their health

[Mr. Nigel Jones]

and fitness—we know about the costs of unfitness—and their quality of life, and the second is the pursuit of excellence, so that British sportsmen and sportswomen can compete and win on the international stage.

The number of top sports performers we produce depends to a large extent on the size of the pool—the number who take up a sport in the first place. There has been some concern in recent years that Britain has not been as successful as in the past at producing top performers. That is not because our performers have been worse but because other countries have invested more and overtaken us. When we consider the likes of Linford Christie, Sally Gunnell, the unique Steve Redgrave and Roger Black, it may sound churlish to suggest that we are not producing top-class performers. However, the comparative lack of success at winning medals last year in Atlanta suggests that all is not well.

Fortunately, since the Secretary of State and the Minister for sport took office a few weeks ago, the corner has been turned. Our footballers have won the Tournoi de France, our cricketers are one up in the Ashes series, thanks to the rain, and the British Lions are rampant in South Africa. Linford Christie led our athletes to victory yet again in the European cup last weekend. If that was his final performance in a British vest, we should thank him for all the pleasure that he has given in his long, distinguished, successful career. If Colin Montgomerie had managed to hole that putt on the 17th in the US Open, the Minister could have reflected on a couple of months of a job well done. Sport is important, and the success of British sportsmen and sportswomen affects the morale of the nation. For many people, it is their most important leisure activity, especially for people in retirement.

I have a little story that ought to go on record. Last Wednesday, the Conservative party was in turmoil deciding whom to vote in as its new leader. It was also the last appearance of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) at Prime Minister's questions, unless the Tories pick him as their next leader after this one. Some wonderful tributes were paid to him by the new Prime Minister and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown). I am told that later, in the Corridor, my right hon. Friend met the former Prime Minister, who thanked him profusely for his kind words. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife was also there and said, "Well John, what are you hoping for tomorrow?" The former Prime Minister thought for a moment and said, "I do hope England win the toss." Perhaps he had his priorities right all along.

Sport has a significant role in raising the quality of life for all citizens. It allows individuals to set their own goals, whether swimming a first width or competing for Olympic medals. There are still significant barriers, in the main financial, deterring people from participating in sport. In the debate on sport in June last year, I mentioned one of my constituents, Leon Taylor. It may be worth giving an update on his progress. He had just won the British men's highboard diving championships. He is now 19 but, when he became champion, he was still at school and it was his great ambition to take part in the Olympic games. As he was relatively young, he was told last year that, to qualify for Olympic selection, he needed to take part in competitions in the United States, Canada and Mexico. Little or no funding was available to get him to those competitions. If he had not had the good fortune to have dedicated parents who, while not rich, were prepared to go without many things such as family holidays, friends who were prepared to dig into their pockets to cough up towards expenses, and one or two local companies and trusts, he would not have been able to go to those competitions, where he competed very well.

Fortunately Leon went and, the day after our debate, he was chosen for the British team in Atlanta. That shows the power of our debates. He made the semi-finals in Atlanta shortly after taking his A-levels. Thanks to the generosity of many companies and individuals, and the support of the *Gloucestershire Echo*, enough money was raised to send Leon's parents and his sister Nadine to watch him perform.

Leon is seeking to qualify for the next Olympic games in Sydney but he has to train mostly in Sheffield because we have no 10 m board in Cheltenham. A lottery grant for that would not go amiss. I hope that the Secretary of State takes note. Earlier this year, Leon made significant strides. He came third in the Europa cup competition, beating the Olympic silver medallist. Next Monday, he is off to Rome for a pre-competition to qualify for the European championships in Seville in August. He hopes to go on to the World cup in Mexico in September. However, even for one who has already been to the Olympics, funding is still a problem. Barclaycard Team 2000 has generously granted him £2,500 a year for the next four years. Elite funding has been mentioned but nothing has yet been forthcoming. I hope that the Minister for sport will discuss elite funding, who will qualify and how much each person may receive.

All those worries put pressure on potential world-beaters such as Leon Taylor that they could well do without. They should be concentrating on achieving excellence in their sport. Such worries also put huge pressure on families. Leon has been lucky and I am sure that hon. Members wish him good luck. We shall follow his progress with interest. For every person like Leon, there are hundreds of young people whose dreams are dashed each year because of the financial barriers put in their way.

Did the Minister see the article by the eminent journalist Ian Burrell in *The Independent* on 9 June? Under the heading,

"Britain's amateurs lose out to glamour sports",

Mr. Burrell points out that funding tends to go to the sports that receive the greatest television coverage. Many sports that attract a lot of people are struggling. The list includes weightlifting, wrestling, volleyball—which was mentioned earlier—handball, basketball, modern pentathlon, triathlon, judo, curling, bobsleigh and speed-skating. I should like to hear from the Minister, perhaps not today, what he intends to do to try to get some money into those sports.

Nigel Hook, technical services director of the Central Council of Physical Recreation, which is the national association for the governing bodies of sport and recreation, said:

"It will require a major feat from the new minister of sport to sort out this mess. With the previous administration the focus was sharply on the élite sports. The consequence was that the Cinderella sports have been left to sink or swim."

I want to deal with two other issues. The national lottery is a gravy train for the Treasury. My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) and I have served

diligently on the Finance Bill Committee for the past three years. He tabled an amendment for a review of the 12 per cent. tax that the Treasury takes from every £1 ticket sale. Two weeks ago, I attended the opening of a wonderful new pavilion for the village cricket team I played for more than 30 years ago at Overbury in Worcestershire. It appears that I was dropped for 30 years running, but I was thrilled to be asked to play on Friday. Unfortunately, the game was washed out, although perhaps that was a good thing for the team, which would probably have lost.

About a quarter of the money for the pavilion came from a national lottery grant. It was pointed out to me, however, that the club had to pay 17.5 per cent. VAT on the building work. Not only does the Treasury get its 12 per cent. of all ticket sales from the lottery, which many people think is too much; it gets another whack when lottery grants are invested in buildings. I wonder how many sports projects never get off the ground because of VAT, which more than doubled during the 18 years of the last Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) is sitting next to me. He is part of our Treasury team and was the Liberal Democrats' economics adviser when I first joined the House. I do not suggest for one moment the abolition of VAT on buildings for sport because he would probably kill me, but we need to consider how to ease the burden.

The second issue that the Government should review is rates for sports clubs. Local authorities have discretionary power to grant rate relief to sports clubs. Non-profit distributing sports clubs pay the uniform business rate on their premises, subject to that discretionary power. A survey carried out by the Central Council of Physical Recreation in 1996 established that, although many local authorities are very co-operative, and despite encouragement by central Government, who provide 75 per cent. of relief from the national non-domestic rate, a hard core still refuse to give any relief, and others give a bare minimum, or grant it only subject to unreasonable conditions. The survey calculated that the current cost of relief to central Government was approximately £14 million—hardly macro-economic. Relief from the tax enables clubs to play a stronger role in local authority youth sport development. The CCPR believes that mandatory rate relief would be fairer to all sports clubs and contribute to the achievement of the Government's aims. I ask the Minister to look into that.

Many people who would make superb coaches cannot take up coaching for one reason or another. There is often little or no finance or opportunity for them to continue their career when their playing career comes to an end. Hon. Members will be aware of my lifelong affliction as a supporter not only of Cheltenham Town football club but of Swindon Town football club. A few years ago, Swindon had a striker called Steve White, known to the fans as Chalky. He always gave 100 per cent., whatever the situation, whatever the conditions. He was and still is a model professional. He was transferred first to Hereford and then to Cardiff, where I think he remains. He must now be past the age of 35—I am probably being generous to him. He would make a superb coach. He has played at the top flight. He played a handful of matches in the one season that Swindon spent in the premiership, when Chelsea rather unsportingly won both matches that we played against it.

Steve White is someone for whom fitness and dedication is the key and he is an example to young people. Every town and every community needs a handful of Chalky Whites to encourage young people to develop the skills to become good club competitors and to strive to reach a higher level. We have already heard that the saving in social costs would be enormous if we could attract more young people into sport. At the recent election, youth crime was high on the agenda of voters' concerns. Young people who get into trouble cost the nation a fortune. Decent sports facilities and proper coaching are a sure-fire way to save a proportion of that fortune. The previous Government introduced the concept of spend to save and investing in sport is a way of doing so.

It would be remiss of me not to repeat my question of last year. I do not understand one decision of the England cricket selectors. As they sit down this weekend to pick the team for the Old Trafford test, I hope that they will remember that catches win matches, and we saw lots of them go down at the last test. I was brought up to believe that the first person one picks for the team is the wicket keeper. So why do the selectors fail to pick the world's best wicket keeper, Jack Russell of Gloucestershire? They dropped him before. He came back in the second test in South Africa to break the world record for dismissals, with 11 dismissals. He scored a century for England. Yet he has been dropped again. No wonder there are some interesting comments in his recently published autobiography—which I have already bought, so I am not angling for a free copy. I trust that, before the summer is out, Jack Russell will be back where he belongs, behind the stumps and contributing to the winning of the Ashes.

The Minister for sport has a wonderful new job. He was probably surprised to get it, but I am delighted that he has. He has a wonderful opportunity to put sport even higher on the agenda than it is already. I wish him well in his task of involving more people in sport and striving for excellence.

11.3 am

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): I shall try to be brief because many hon. Members want to speak, and I shall not respond to the remarks of the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones). I intended to congratulate the Tory Front-Bench spokesman, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), on his return to the House after five years, but after listening to his speech I think that if he had been playing in a football match he would have been substituted by the manager half way through and sent off to the Back Benches. However, he has now left the Chamber so I shall begin by issuing a genuine vote of thanks to the Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks).

My hon. Friend started off in some controversy in the newspapers, but within two weeks of taking office he delivered something that the whole of football had wanted from the previous Government for at least two years. I thank him on behalf of the Football Trust for what he announced literally two weeks after the Queen's Speech. He said that a total of £55 million would be available for essential work at football grounds at all levels throughout England, and that the Football Trust would receive £35 million—£5 million a year for the next four years

[Mr. Joe Ashton]

from the Premier League and £5 million a year for the next three years from the English Sports Council—and £2.5 million over the next four years from the English Sports Council and the Football Association for non-Taylor ground redevelopment work.

I do not want to get too technical, but people are probably aware that after the Hillsborough disaster in 1989—I will not go into it because there is to be a statement on Monday—the Taylor report said that football grounds had to become all-seater. It said that football grounds were dangerous and in a terrible state. The House agreed. Unfortunately, the Conservative Government did not agree to put any money towards the necessary work. Not only that, but they punished the football pools, which were paying towards ground improvements, by increasing the tax on the pools from 40 to 45 per cent. They generously reduced it back to 40 per cent. in order to make available a bit of cash for football ground improvements. They then allowed it gradually to dwindle to 35 per cent., even though the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the Member of Parliament representing Nottingham Forest, happened to be Chancellor of the Exchequer. The best that he could do was to reduce the tax to about 27 per cent. over the years.

Then along came the lottery. What was the tax on the lottery? It was 12 per cent. Was it any wonder that people started betting on the lottery and stopped betting on the football pools? The income available for improving football grounds went down and down and ground improvements sank into disaster, even though they had created many jobs since 1990. Tarmac in my constituency made all the concrete steps for the Anfield ground in Liverpool and for West Ham's ground. Practically the only building taking place in towns in the north of England was at new football stands. Girder work was rapidly put through for Euro 96. The money came from the pools, but the lottery knocked the pools sideways.

We begged the Tory Government to put something in place of the pools money, but they did nothing. My hon. Friend the Minister, despite abuse from the Opposition, immediately announced massive help funded by the lottery, the Premier League and others to keep the valuable work going and maintain the Football Trust. The whole sport is grateful to him.

If my hon. Friend would like to become a lot more popular, he might go down to Wimbledon this afternoon and announce some money to put a roof over the courts. The tournament is run by the Wimbledon whingers. Year after year, they moan and groan about the weather. With all the profits that they have made, it is not as if they could not put a glass roof over the courts. They maintain the tradition of making people queue all night. If people do not get in, it is hard lines. There was eight minutes of play the other day and people did not get their money back.

In professional football, when matches were cancelled because of snow, under-floor heating was put in. When they were cancelled because of fog, floodlights were put in. Some people market their game and go for sponsorship. That is why the Premier League is successful. Others in cricket and tennis, I am sorry to say, wring their hands and moan about the weather. Perhaps my hon. Friend might like to suggest such a measure to the tennis people in Wimbledon and get some lottery money put towards it.

With £670 million over four years from Sky, people might ask why football needs help to develop grounds, but it is not premier league clubs that are asking for help. It is smaller clubs such as Halifax, which went out of business because it could not survive the pressure. Only four Conservative Members now represent a constituency which includes a professional football club in the football league or premier league. That may be the trend and the Conservative party may not be too bothered about football, but the little clubs are struggling and they drastically need the money that my hon. Friend the Minister has given to them.

The future for football, with the Sky cash rolling in, is phenomenal. So are the wages that the clubs have to pay. I meant to declare my interest at the beginning of my speech. I am a director of Sheffield Wednesday football club and the chairman of the all-party football committee of the House, so I have a close knowledge of the costs of running a football club.

It is quite common for the top stars of the game to ask for £500,000 a year, which they are paid even if they get injured. They get paid £10,000 a week, not £10,000 a game. Given the crowds that they attract, however, that is rather like paying Pavarotti or some other international opera star to appear. When one thinks about the cash that such players can bring in from television, the select few who are good enough can command those wages and fees. It is a precarious business, however, because a player paid that much could break his leg next week and never be able to play again, as happens to many professionals.

I have heard many hon. Members complain that players are paid too much and that the tickets for a game are too expensive. They should remember that when British players got low wages, all our best players played in Italy. Trevor Francis, Liam Brady, Kevin Keegan and Gazza went abroad to play. Now that players are getting big money, the foreign players are coming here and our youngsters are learning from them. Those wages have created a quality improvement in the game.

I appreciate that people often say that they cannot afford a dish to watch football on Sky. I must say that when a match on Sky is shown at my local pub, people cannot get in. In the north of England the beer is a pound a pint until the first goal. The match is often followed by karaoke or perhaps even a stripper, so it is a big night out. When local clubs are on television their gates often drop by 10,000.

Sky broadcasts are available to the poorer members of the community—indeed, games other than those on Sky are also seen, and I know that the Premier League is worried about that. When I was in a taxi the other week the driver said, "That was a great game at Hillsborough on Saturday against Liverpool." I asked him whether he had gone; he said that he had watched it on television. I said that it was not on television, except in Scandinavia, where their teams do not play in January. He told me that he watched it half a mile up the road at the pub. One of the lads went in, used his card, turned the aerial, jiggled it about and tuned it in. They all watched the game for free at the pub. The poor are very ingenious and there are very few top level-goals that are not shown on terrestrial

television. Football is seen by the hard-up supporters, even if we do have to pay fantastic amounts of money to our top players.

My hon. Friend the Minister for sport has already said that his season ticket for Chelsea cost £480.

Mr. Banks: No, it cost £867.

Mr. Ashton: My hon. Friend could get one for Sheffield Wednesday for £280. We have a system whereby kids can get into the ground for as little as £3. We must invest in the future. If we let children in at rock bottom prices, they will get bitten by the bug and the clubs will get their money back 100 times over. I very much regret the fact that some of the top clubs have said that they cannot find room to let children in at low prices.

Despite the cost of going to games and the broadcasting of games on Sky, attendances are up. Grounds are now 89 per cent. full. In fact, one cannot get in without a season ticket at Newcastle or Manchester United because their games are always booked up in advance. The marketing of the game has been phenomenal and has been a marvellous combination of private enterprise, self-control and self-regulation. The Football Association has done a wonderful job in stamping out hooliganism, and players who give the game a bad reputation are disciplined immediately—Cantona was immediately sentenced to a six-month ban.

We should also give credit where it is due to the all-party football committee, which has more than 100 members from the Back Benches and the Lords. It, too, has helped to improve the game and such partnership has been superb. I hope that the Football Association and the Premier League can extend that partnership by offering coaching to young people, which is badly needed. I regret that, years ago, many teachers opted out of taking school football on a Saturday morning or in the evenings after school. I know that, at the time, teachers had a row with the Government about pay. They said that their contracts did not cover refereeing games and that they would work only their contract hours, but we all learnt about sport at school and afterwards, when we kicked a tanner ball on the streets in the evening. Those days have gone. Now, schools have to rely on the enthusiasm of parents, but many are enthusiastic only while their own kids are playing. We must revive the sport at school.

In a couple of weeks I will meet my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment with other members of the football community to see how we can encourage football at school. We have many, many ex-professionals in all sports who cannot play their game any longer because they are too old, but they are still only about 35 or 40. They would love to have a job teaching kids in school. I suggested that to high-level representatives of the Premier League, who have expressed a certain interest in that proposal. They have said that they would not mind putting millions of pounds into that.

The Professional Footballers Association—the players' union—has said such a scheme would be a godsend to ex-players looking for jobs. Imagine that there were a couple of ex-pros in each town. They could go to one school on a Monday afternoon and visit another on Tuesday morning and give a couple of hours of coaching. They would be revered by the kids, who would see them as gods. Their names would be remembered and their dads would tell them what great players they had been. Those kids would listen far more to those coaches than they would to dear old Mr. Chips, who might watch them kick a ball about when he had a spare hour.

I know that, as always with education, any such scheme would run into some bureaucracy. I am sure that local education committees would say that such a scheme would need to be overseen by a secretary, that it would have to be recorded on the minutes and so on. That is the one thing that the people in football are scared of. They do not want to be bogged down in the bureaucracy of local government, where everything has to be approved by a committee. If a school does not want a coach to talk to its kids, fine, it does not have to have one. It would be entirely voluntary. The people in football are willing to pay for such a scheme if schools would only say that they would co-operate.

I am pretty certain that those who have played tennis or who have competed in swimming, who have now given up their sport and miss it tremendously, would jump at the chance to receive a small payment or regular wage for coaching kids. Teachers have too much on their plates already. Indeed, schools do not have the money to employ a sports master. Many sports have money and I am sure that if coaching was offered to schools many of them would accept it. It is just a matter of bringing the strings together. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is trying to introduce such partnerships and I hope that they will go ahead.

Three weeks before the election I went to our stadium at Hillsborough with the Prime Minister. A lot of people thought that it was a stunt when he talked about somewhere where children could go to do their homework. Many kids today want to study because they know that that is the only way they can make progress. I lived in a terrible slum when I was growing up. I will not bore the House with that, but there was never anywhere for me to do my homework. We all lived in one room with the television and the radio on. I could not keep warm if I went anywhere else. Many kids live in similar conditions, but people do not appreciate their difficulties. Football grounds are an ideal place where those kids could do their homework because they have huge halls that are not used during the week. Kids would love to be associated with those grounds and those in the sport would be happy to provide those facilities.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment can get such schemes off the ground. It would be great to establish partnerships between the big cathedrals of sport at the highest level of the game and those at the lowest level, the people on the street.

11.18 am

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): It is highly appropriate that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, should be in the Chair for this debate on sport for all given your work in the past with the rugby union group in the House.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) to the Opposition Front Bench and my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), who is our shadow Secretary of State for National Heritage. As he explained earlier, he has had to leave the Chamber for the Hong Kong handover celebrations.

[Mr. Nick Hawkins]

As the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) said, the new Minister for sport had a controversial start. Although we may disagree on a number of issues, I am sure that we all agree that one of the most important aspects of sport for all is sport for the disabled. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bassetlaw, who does sterling work as chairman of the all-party football committee, of which I have been proud to be a member throughout my time in the House.

We all recognise that many disabled people are not able to participate in sports such as football and that enormously valuable work is being done by Disabled Sport England and many other organisations. Disabled Sport England—formerly the British Sports Association for the Disabled—has published a superb leaflet called "Sport for All". It is tremendously important to those of us who have been involved in fundraising for disabled sportspeople that the subject is covered in debates such as this. I hope that the Minister for sport will concentrate on some of the important issues relating to the funding that disabled sportspeople need.

I have worked with some of the disabled fencers who have been involved in several of the recent Paralympics. They have stressed to me that, at one of our national sports centres, pending the creation of the new British academy of sport—Crystal palace—there is totally inadequate access for disabled sportspeople. I urge the Minister for sport to look in particular at facilities for the disabled when the site is chosen for the British academy of sport. I know he shares my concern.

Mr. Banks: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for speaking on that part of sport for all with which I am personally involved and to which I am strongly committed. I give him a total assurance that the British academy of sport will include the best sporting facilities for our Paralympians, who achieve wonderful things for this country—for example, they received an enormous number of gold medals at the Atlanta Paralympics.

Mr. Hawkins: I am grateful for that assurance—I hoped and expected that the Minister would be able to give it. I am sure that all those involved in sport for the disabled will welcome that.

I am sure that the Minister will agree that valuable support has been given to disabled sport, especially by companies such as British Telecom, which has pumped a vast amount of funding into the field. Those of us who have worked with British Telecom and those of its staff who have been involved in its disabled sports programme know how valuable it is. A large number of companies are needed to support disabled sport. The Minister will also agree with the tribute paid by my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham to the former Minister for sport, our friend Iain Sproat who, sadly, is no longer in the House. He also was deeply involved in ensuring that there were facilities for disabled sportspeople—not only Paralympians but disabled sportspeople at every level.

The Minister will be aware that, in the recent debates on firearms legislation, I and other hon. Members have drawn attention to the sadness felt by those involved in the British Paraplegic Shooting Association that they have been unable to persuade the new Government to make exceptions for paraplegic shooters. I hope that, even at this late stage, the Government may be persuaded by some of the arguments advanced in another place that exceptions should be made for those who are paraplegic or in other ways disabled and unable to take part in any sport other than pistol shooting. I hope that further consideration will be given to that issue.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) and the Secretary of State have referred to the important work done by the Central Council of Physical Recreation, which regularly publishes excellent documents and which has produced a helpful set of documents relating to sport for all. The council stresses that the general household survey estimates that about 29 million adults—almost 60 per cent. of the entire population—regularly take part in sport or some form of physical recreation. Even more people watch sport and I share the delight of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw that some 31 million people were attracted through the turnstiles to watch football last season. The figures continue to rise, which is a welcome contrast to the falling attendances at football matches during the 1970s and 1980s.

Sport also produces wealth and, in conjunction with tourism and leisure, is an important industry in this country and one in which Britain excels. Sport directly produces employment for nearly half a million people and sport and leisure account for some £10 billion in consumer expenditure, generating £3.5 billion for the Treasury, which was another point touched on by the hon. Member for Cheltenham.

It is important to look at the importance of sport for young people. I share the concern of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw about the fact that so much sport disappeared from schools when teachers declined to supervise children participating in sport after school or in school hours. I am delighted that, despite the fact that the politically correct notion of getting rid of competitive sport in schools was at its height when the new Minister for sport was involved in running the Greater London council, more mature considerations are now prevalent on the Labour Benches.

Labour Members have come to share our view that it was quite wrong to allow that sort of political correctness to creep into schools. We now have a bipartisan attitude to the importance of competitive sport in schools and some of the socialist nostrums of the past have been cast away. This is yet another example of the triumph of Conservative ideas, which have now informed new Labour. Our views have always been consistent: throughout the period in which Labour local authorities were supporting left-wing teachers in banning competitive sport in schools, Conservative Members said that competitive sport mattered. At long last, the new Labour Government have accepted that we were right and that many of their colleagues in local government and many left-wing teachers were wrong.

There are still, I regret to say, some politically correct attitudes to be seen in the new Labour Government. We saw some of that in the exchanges between the new Secretary of State and my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham in their opening speeches today.

At this stage, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I must apologise for the fact that I am to be denied the pleasure of listening to the winding-up speeches as I have a constituency surgery to attend. However, I look forward to reading *Hansard* and discovering how the Minister for sport tackles some

of these issues. Ministers and Labour Back Benchers should be aware that many of us will continue to oppose their proposals for a right to roam; and we will continue to oppose their belief that one can have rights without responsibilities.

Finally, although we may share many views about sport, we also believe that the Government are quite wrong to dismiss, in the offhand manner displayed by the Secretary of State for Health, the tobacco companies' support for sport. For the Minister for sport's benefit, I shall quote remarks on that subject by some of our leading sports administrators. Ken Schofield, the executive director of the Professional Golfers Association European Tour, said:

"The PGA European Tour believes in individual freedom of choice. With that background, clearly we would want the outstanding support over many years, of many various British sports—including tournament golf—by the tobacco industry to continue."

John Spencer of the World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association pointed out that

"The major contributing factor in the phenomenal growth of professional snooker during the last 19 years is sponsorship and the most valued sponsors are those who have been able to demonstrate a long term commitment to our game."

Malcolm Burdett of the National Federation of Anglers—representing a sport of which the new Government have confirmed they are strongly in favour, so they might pay attention to this statement—said:

"The sport finds it difficult to achieve sponsorship from other sources. The reason is the same as it is for all the so-called minority sports—they seldom manage to achieve proper TV coverage."

Finally, David Frame, the chief executive of the British Ice Hockey Association, said:

"Minor sports are having great difficulty attracting sponsorship and it is difficult to perceive British ice hockey continuing in its current format without the support of Benson and Hedges. This sponsorship is enabling us to enhance the development of the sport."

As a non-smoker, I may share the health concerns expressed by some Labour Members, but we have to recognise that it is not appropriate to dismiss out of hand a large source of funding for sport. I may disagree with the hon. Member for Bassetlaw about some of the effects resulting from one satellite television company trying to reduce the number of our national sporting occasions available on television, but I recognise the importance of the funding that that provides. Similarly, whatever the health arguments may be, we should have a genuine and separate debate on whether it is wise for the Government to dismiss a very substantial amount of funding for sport without any guarantee that other sources of funding are available.

When the battle starts about country sports and our different views about what constitutes a sport, Labour Members must recognise the accuracy of what my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham said about the very many people from all walks of life and all levels of income who support a traditional part of our countryside. Let Labour Members be under no illusion: many of us will fight to retain people's freedom of choice to participate in all the sports that they have loved for generations, and we shall continue to debate that matter. I hope that some Labour Members will be able to support us in what is supposed to be a free vote on the rights of people in the countryside to follow the sports that they love.

I shall be brief because others wish to speak, but I want to close as I began: by concentrating on the importance of disabled sport. I wish to pay tribute to some of the key achievements of disabled sport in 1996–97. The creation of the lottery has been a tremendous help. Never let it be forgotten that the lottery was introduced by the previous Government, and has provided the most important increase in sports funding in our lifetimes.

An official of the Sports Council told me, "In 17 years in this job I have been desperately seeking funding, but since the lottery has come in I have been able to provide funding. Through the lottery funds I have provided more in a year than in all the previous 16 years." I welcome the facilities that have been provided for sport, especially disabled sport, by means of the lottery created by the previous Conservative Government.

During 1996 and 1997, Disabled Sport England was able to initiate, organise and secure commercial sponsorship for the first UK-wide athletics championships for all disability groups, an event which also attracted entries from five overseas countries. Disabled Sport England prepared a new four-year swimming development plan—in which I am especially involved—and secured direct sponsorship of no less than £938,000 for the four-year period. It developed comprehensive event management guidelines to help governing bodies, local authorities and other organisations to manage events for and including disabled people.

Disabled Sport England successfully managed a programme of 14 national championships, including a total sponsorship requirement in excess of £300,000. It initiated and co-ordinated the development of a national junior sports programme for disabled people, which has been subscribed to by all the national disability sports organisations. Finally, it successfully co-ordinated the London wheelchair marathon, increasing entries and sponsorship on previous years.

A fantastic amount of sport for the disabled is being supported and there are tremendous opportunities for sport for all—able-bodied and disabled. I hope that we shall maintain a bipartisan belief in sport and the importance of sport while remaining of the view that on some issues we must avoid the Orwellian newspeak that still creeps into the new Government's rhetoric.

11.32 am

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am delighted that you are in the Chair this morning, because you are one of the few Members who has attended and participated in most of our sporting debates, and I know that your words of wisdom, especially on professional rugby, were listened to attentively by hon. Members.

I congratulate the Front-Bench national heritage team on their appointment and on securing this debate on sport so early in the Session. I also congratulate the Opposition Front-Bench team. I am sorry that the hon. and learned Member for North–East Fife (Mr. Campbell) is not in the Chamber today, because he is another regular attender, but I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones). It is true that there is cross-party consensus on many sports issues, which is to the good of sport.

I especially congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks) on his appointment as Minister for sport. We all know the tremendous energy, enthusiasm and commitment that he showed as chairman of the arts

[Kate Hoey]

and sports committee of the Greater London council, and that experience and the attributes that he brings to his post will enormously benefit sport.

I give my hon. Friend the Minister a word of advice. He should remember that there is more than Chelsea football team in this country and there is more than the premier league. I know that in the past he stood up strongly for football supporters, and I hope that in his new role he continues to do so.

I fear that the new Minister inherits from the previous Government a legacy of inaction and delayed decisions. That is not to say that there were not a lot of good intentions, and I believe that specifically the previous Minister for sport and the previous Prime Minister had good intentions, but as you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, good intentions and well-meaning words do not produce results; only actions matter. I hope that the new Minister will dither less and do more than previous holders of his job.

The Minister has also inherited a not especially well-regarded bureaucracy of sport in the UK. I am someone who at least thinks that I know quite a lot about the structure of sport in the UK, but I admit that the exact details of administration are very unclear, even to me. I am not sure about the exact rules of the five sports councils, each of which is the responsibility of a different Secretary of State. I welcome the Secretary of State's mention of the need for clarification.

I do not want many more months of review and consultation, because in the past five years we have had review after review after review on the structure of sport, and it is time to take decisions and sort things out. If we are serious about a sport for all policy—I believe that the Government are committed to sport for all—it is crucial that there is co-ordination among all the Departments when policy impinges on education and employment, health and the Home Office.

If we are serious about sport for all, we need to be very serious indeed about the grass roots of sport, and ensure that resources are getting to where they are needed and where they can be used. Those two things are not always the same.

Let us consider where the best practice is—where keen, dedicated people are already doing great work with young people, but could do so much more with slightly more help and resources. So often, under the present system of allocation of Sports Council grants via the national lottery, that does not happen. We seem continually to want to reinvent the wheel, and it is worth remembering that, since 1972, the Sports Council has received more than £900 million in grant aid from the Government, more than £500 million of which has been spent on administration. Of course, administration is necessary, and of course much of that goes to staff and so on, but we must sometimes question the huge amount that seems to be spent on bureaucracy; I know that the Minister for sport will want to consider that.

There is so much talent in this country, especially in our inner cities. In my borough of Lambeth, for many years, sport was the first thing to be cut when cuts were made, because it had no statutory rights. For the past six years, volunteers have kept alive Lambeth's entry to the London youth games—now known as the London Heathrow youth games, because when sponsors are putting money in, we should give them a mention.

The council had no sports development work until the Lambeth Independent Sports Association was set up, chaired by Caroline Clark. The volunteers did that work because they had a concern for young people and wanted them to be able to enjoy the fun and development that sport can offer. I am pleased that, at last, Lambeth is backing the Lambeth Independent Sports Association with a small amount of finance and recognition but, like other parts of inner cities, Lambeth is terribly lacking in facilities. There are several good cricket teams, but no Lambeth ground.

As an elected member of Surrey County cricket club, I must say that Surrey is doing its part. It has opened up its facilities in the winter to Tony Moodie, who is one of the people who coaches in the parks during the summer. Many young black people play cricket in the summer, but in the winter they had nowhere else to go. We badly need a small amount of money to help create a home for Lambeth community cricket on Clapham common. Grand Sports Council plans are not necessary to get that going. People already have the commitment to get it going. Something needs to happen.

I am afraid that when dedicated local volunteers try to get something done, they are often dispirited by the huge bureaucracy that they have to deal with. If the Minister really is to make a difference, he should find the people who can get things done and not waste time on huge amounts of bureaucracy and structures that one sometimes has the impression are set up to keep people in jobs.

Despite those setbacks in Lambeth, we have been listening to people at the grass roots, because they know what is happening. A small girls school in my constituency has beaten all other English school teams at cross country, yet there is no running track at the school or in Lambeth. That achievement is partly due to the extra time and commitment of the school's dedicated physical education teacher.

The Brixton Top Cats basketball team, coached by the marvellous Jimmy Rogers, produce gold medals for Lambeth at the boys junior national championship. They cannot compete in the national league, as their home facility has no licence for charging for sporting events. Lambeth trampoliners compete at national level. Their judge is one of the nation's best, yet they, too, have no Lambeth home.

Caroline Clark wrote to me recently, and she wanted me to pass on her comments to the Minister. It is easier to pass them on in public than in private, so I shall quote her letter:

"We know that Tony Banks has a special concern for the loss of playing fields to both schools and communities. We hope that in his plans for reassessing and developing sporting opportunities he can closely consider the issues around partnership work and on accessing facilities for both school and community use. Sometimes the community has a better way of building basic blocks for development than those ways imposed by experts at the Town Hall. We hope he will consider the views, knowledge and skills of people like us when he develops his strategy. Can you urge on him our concerns?"

Well, Caroline, I am urging on him your concerns today.

When we debate sport, the importance of school sport and what is going on in schools is nearly always mentioned. I hope that the Minister will work closely with

his hon. Friends in the Department for Education and Employment. We must increase the number and improve the quality of physical education teachers. Some trainee teachers have as little as 10 hours' physical education training, and that must be increased. Teachers are sometimes helped by volunteers. The Central Council of Physical Recreation is concerned about the section of the Police Act 1997 that will require volunteers to pay for monitoring, to find out whether they have a criminal background. That is sad, and could be changed quickly. Some of the problems facing volunteers require practical solutions.

I urge the Minister to read the report of the Adjournment debate that I secured last year on swimming and schools. The national curriculum requires schools to get children up to a basic level and then swimming is stopped, because it is not seen as an important event in its own right. Once that narrow requirement of the national curriculum is satisfied, that is it and there is no more swimming for many. That is sad. The cost of access to swimming pools and the cost of transport should also be examined.

We must support inter-school competition. Competition within schools is important, but schools are not competing with each other as much as they used to. We must give the English School Sports Association more support. It does a terrific job and should be applauded, rewarded, supported and valued. It achieves so much on so little. Just think what more could be done with a little extra help.

I supported the lottery from day one, and I think that Camelot has done a wonderful job. It is not Camelot's fault that the House required it to undertake its work in a particular way. If more hon. Members who were against the lottery had spent more time arguing about how it was to be implemented rather than against the principle, we might have had a lottery that provided more money for good causes. I do not think that Camelot has done anything wrong in the past few weeks: it has simply carried out the task that it was given by Parliament, and it should not be criticised for that.

I heard this morning that a particular individual is likely to make a huge fortune out of the millennium project at Greenwich. I hope that the Minister for sport accepts that that may not be the best way to proceed with the project. I say that to show that hon. Members can say what they think, and are not necessarily bound by party policy on such issues.

If we are serious about sport for all, we must get back to grass roots. That does not mean that I do not support a British academy of sport. I want that decision to be taken as quickly as possible. I know a lot about the three bids. I have talked to people and I have seen the sites, so I could make my decision now, but I will not do so. I shall not try to influence the decision, but we must make it soon. It will not be popular with two sites, whatever we do. We should stop faffing around and get on with it.

A national academy is fine, but if we neglect the base, there is no point having one. If there are no youngsters coming through and getting that first opportunity at school or in a sports club, a national academy will be only for the people who have the talent and the money: we want people with talent and no money to get through as well.

May we also have a decision soon on the national stadium? The decision has been taken for Wembley, but we shall have to wait until September to get approval for lottery funding. If the decision has been taken and lottery funding has been set aside, why cannot the project start straight away? A new Wembley is crucial if we are to have a chance of hosting the World cup. If we get the World cup in 2006, let us ensure that the whole of the United Kingdom has a share in it. It may be an English bid for technical reasons, but let us ensure that matches are played in Scotland, at Windsor Park in Northern Ireland and in Cardiff. People in the whole of the United Kingdom should be able to feel that it is their World cup, even if it is officially England's. There is no reason why we cannot do that: two countries will host the next but one World cup.

Is the Minister committed to keeping athletics at Crystal palace, which is vital not only to London but to the whole of the south of England?

We read a lot about sleaze in Parliament, but we are facing up to that. The Department of National Heritage, aided and abetted by some of the powers that be in football, was wilful in its avoidance of any interest in the bribery and corruption scandal in our national game. The Revenue and VAT officials recovered more than £12 million in their actions for tax fraud against professional football at club, official and player level. I pay tribute to the tax officials, whose work has been commendable.

However, after all these years—it is almost four years—we still have not had a final report from the Premier League inquiry into the various allegations of bungs. I am sure that it will be a whitewash, but I hope that the Minister for sport will not let the Premier League off the hook. I maintain that football cannot police itself. There is a need for a compliance unit, which was the subject of my ten-minute Bill a couple of years ago. The buck has to stop with the Minister for sport, and I have every confidence that he will ensure that the Premier League inquiry is published, even if it sweeps the matter under the carpet.

I welcome the new broom at the Football Association. I particularly welcome the appointment of Glenn Hoddle, the work that Howard Wilkinson is doing with young football trainees and the way in which he is approaching the training of footballers. I hope that he will get support from schools and local authorities for his plans.

I shall make just two final points, because I know that many new Members wish to speak. It is a positive sign that so many new Members are present; there are usually far fewer Members here for such debates, so it is nice to see some new faces.

The Minister needs to tread carefully on the question of sponsorship by tobacco companies. I have always been anti-smoking; I hate smoking and would like it if no one smoked, but recognise that smoking is still within the law and that the Chancellor takes an enormous amount of money from tobacco companies. If we are to stop sports sponsorship by tobacco companies, the Minister's job has to be to replace that money one way or another so that the minority sports, especially those such as angling which do not have television coverage, do not lose out.

I do not accept the notion that someone who watches a car racing at about 150 mph at the British grand prix in the colours of a particular cigarette company will suddenly decide that he must go and buy a packet of cigarettes. Youngsters are not turned on to smoking by the fact that tobacco money goes into sport; they are much

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more likely to be turned on to smoking by watching "Eastenders". If we go down that slippery road, the next thing will be alcohol sponsorship of sports. I think that alcohol is even more dangerous than cigarettes, so we have to be careful. I know that the Minister will consider the matter, because it is the Minister's job to ensure that sport does not suffer.

I appeal to the Secretary of State and the whole Department not to spend a great deal of money working out whether to change the Department's name. They should not worry about the name, which is irrelevant. We have all got used to the title "The Department of National Heritage", and the Department should not waste money and time changing headed notepaper and so on just for the sake of it. That is not important; what is important is what the Department does.

The key test of the Government's success in sport will be the quantity and quality of participation in sport. It will be whether youngsters with talent get help at the appropriate time in their career and whether they have the opportunity to participate in any sport they wish and to do so at the highest level they can. That is the key test of whether the Government are successful in our sports manifesto.

11.52 am

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) and my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) on their appointment to the Opposition Front Bench and wish them much success and a run of good form in their time in their new capacity. I also congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage, the hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks); as a new Member, I very much look forward to witnessing his renowned quickness of wit.

Sport is central to the British way of life. Although we probably have more of a tendency to watch than to participate, just over half the adult population plays some form of sport once a month. We all know that that frequency of playing sport is not likely to benefit our overall condition. It is also a fact that women are less likely to play sport than men.

I approach the debate from the perspective of the fitness that sport can confer. "The Health of the Nation" initiative, set up under the previous Government, set a goal of reducing obesity among women by one third by the year 2005 and by 25 per cent. among men. The third progress report of that initiative, which was published in July last year, showed that no significant step had been achieved towards either of those targets. Another finding of the progress report was also worrying, in that the proportion of children aged 11 to 15 who smoke has risen by 50 per cent. since 1988.

The promotion of sport among young people is vital if the health of the nation is to be improved. The Sports Council currently allocates £4 million per annum to various sporting initiatives involving young people. However, there is patently more success in encouraging sports uptake among young men than among young women.

In 1993, a shoe company undertook some research, which showed that three out of five teenage girls played no sport at all outside school. For young women, the only sporting activities being undertaken twice a week are cycling, walking, keep fit and weight training. Further research shows that 66 per cent. of girls dislike the kind of sport on offer in schools and particularly object to competitive sports where there are winners and losers. It is different for boys: only 38 per cent. said that they disliked sports with a competitive element, which shows a different approach to sport and exercise among men and women.

Another marked contrast is that only 30 per cent. of 14 to 16-year-old girls undertook sport to be with their friends, which compares with 52 per cent. of boys. That shows that the social aspect of sport is less important for women, although that may have something to do with the type of sport on offer.

Sport for young women does not enjoy a good image. In the modern idiom, we would say that it is not cool for a young woman to do sport. I urge the Minister to think of ways to change that. Let us consider media coverage of women's sport. Of all the television sports coverage in this country, only 6 per cent. is devoted to women's sport, and the figure for newspaper coverage is only 13 per cent.

To take up the point made by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton), it is no good being glib about sponsorship. Commercial sponsors are not interested in sport if there is very little media coverage, which is what women's sports suffer from. Commercial sponsors are reluctant to back women's sports because they do not get the television and newspaper coverage that they need.

It is therefore no wonder that even committed teenage sportswomen could name only one famous British sportswoman. I am sure that we could all name her, too—Sally Gunnell—but what about our other athletes such as Kelly Holmes and Tessa Sanderson? In addition, it is really only athletes and tennis stars who have become household names in women's sports.

Mr. Ashton: Is it not a fact that many young women go in for aerobics and classes or even dance in nightclubs, and that they provide their main forms of exercise? That is why women do not go out on to a muddy football field.

Mrs. Spelman: I am coming to that very point in relation to the national curriculum's contribution to sport.

The problem is that young women often lack a well-publicised role model. Perhaps the Minister for sport and the Department for Education and Employment could look at ways in which the profiles of successful sportswomen could be raised in education, so that young women have a wider range of role models.

The image of women's sport is not helped by the way in which it is reported. The back page of *The Mirror* on 25 June—I am not sure how many hon. Members had the chance to look at it—had what can only be described as an uncompromising photograph of the world-class tennis player Monica Seles in action, with disparaging remarks about her weight gain. Young women need positive role models, not the running down of the sporting achievements of stars.

The previous Government launched a number of initiatives to promote sport for young people, one of which was the introduction of two hours of physical education into the national curriculum. I am glad that the Heart of England school at Balsall Common in my constituency has shown how that time can be used

creatively, taking account of the attitudes towards sport of young men and women that I mentioned earlier. Girls and boys can choose a sport from a range of options. They have an opportunity to try those sports and then pursue them in more depth. The sports teachers also use that time for modules about anatomy and physiology, so that young people learn about the way in which exercise can keep them in good shape. The school recognises that young people need a positive experience of sport. Forcing teenagers into strange and unmodish sports kit to do a sport that they would never choose can be detrimental. The school has proved that embracing the times with aerobics and dance classes can be fun and beneficial.

I think nostalgically of my time at school, where sporting attainment was held in equal esteem with academic achievement. The dedication of teachers who gave up their Saturdays to promote our school teams left a great impression on me.

I was encouraged to hear the hon. Member for Bassetlaw suggest that we could do more to promote the use of sports facilities out of school hours. Even if that is not supervised by professional teachers, it could be done by ex-professionals. Fathers often put in time at weekends to run sports coaching these days. More often than not, that is for boys' sports. What can be done to encourage mums to show up on a Saturday and give a good example to young women, by giving up their free time to encourage them in their sport? The teaching profession could also be encouraged to reconsider such a contribution on a Saturday morning. Such dedication from a mentor who gives up their free time to encourage a child to pursue a sport in depth has a wider lesson for life than just the pursuit of a sport. That willingness to make a sacrifice rests with us when we think back to the time when we were encouraged at school.

I am greatly concerned about the future funding of sport if national lottery funds are diverted into mainstream public policy areas such as health and education. The lottery has made a real difference to sport. The Secretary of State said today that the number of national lottery awards to sport has risen to more than 3,000 and that £540 million of lottery money is going to sport. That dwarfs the Government's £50 million of dedicated core funding for sport in the past year. Small clubs and groups all over the country have benefited from improvements to their sports facilities—the refurbishment of a sports pavilion, the purchase of a new set of goalposts or the installation of a ramp to make facilities accessible to the disabled. Taking away the profit motive from running the lottery may sound "cute", as the *Financial Times* said,

"but the victims will very likely be the good causes the lottery is purportedly set up to serve."

It is decision time for the new Labour Government. We need to know where the academy of sport and the national stadium will be. The uncertainty does not serve the industry. How will the Government prevent the dilution of sports funding from the national lottery? When will their election pledge of a youth sports unit be fulfilled? How will they shift a generation of potential couch potatoes into regular exercise and invest for the health of the nation in the next millennium?

12.3 pm

Mr. Alan Keen (Feltham and Heston): I have no financial interest in the issue about which I am going to speak. I shall explain later why I want to speak about a subject that is not close to my constituency.

A direct loss of at least £7.5 million, a £50,000 fine, personnel assembled at a cost of £20 million looking for new jobs and at least 30,000 local people in uproar—what crime could have led to those consequences? Is it fraud, corruption or deceit? No. Those penalties are the known effects of what prosecuting counsel conceded was an

"honest error of judgment made in good faith."

Where in the world would an honest error of judgment made in good faith be punished so harshly? Could it be a central African dictatorship, a banana republic in Latin America or a totalitarian dictatorship in eastern Europe? No. The punishment was imposed not far from here at 17 Lancaster gate in Bayswater on 14 January this year by the Football Association and Premier League. Why was such a penalty imposed? It was imposed because Middlesbrough football club committed an honest error of judgment made in good faith and postponed its league fixture with Blackburn Rovers.

Whatever the facts may be, and they have now been broadcast and published widely, a number of specific questions have been raised by the club chairman, Steve Gibson, the *Evening Gazette* in Middlesbrough, the national press and Members of Parliament, yet no answers have been forthcoming from the Premier League.

The most telling example is as follows. When seeking advice before the postponement, the club was told that it could not postpone the game "without just cause". However, within three weeks, the same officers of the Premier League advised with great clarity the Premier League commission that heard the charge against Middlesbrough. They told the commission that Middlesbrough had not acted with just cause. Are we to believe that, had Middlesbrough been told with such clarity that postponing the game would lead to a three-point deduction, it would have recklessly gone ahead with that action?

The Premier League has been asked to answer many such questions. It has responded with equally implausible answers, but has not yet committed them to paper. The Premier League and the Football Association preside over a business with an annual income of more than £200 million. Whether that money is raised directly through the turnstiles or from television, ultimately it all comes from ordinary football supporters, who have a right to expect the administrators of the game to act in a proper manner.

The Premier League and the Football Association govern themselves with no appeal beyond their confines. They rely on the provision that the result of any appeal to a Football Association board against a Premier League commission decision shall be final and binding. That denies any external body the opportunity to review the internal decisions made by those organisations.

At a time when organisations that occupy privileged positions are under the greatest pressure to demonstrate their open governance by allowing outsiders to review their decisions, football is still slamming the door on such a process. I should like to ask why.

We should also remind ourselves of the circumstances surrounding the allegations made against Tottenham Hotspur relating to the payment of financial incentives. Tottenham admitted making improper and illegal payments and had six points deducted. However, by some means, the club's advisers secured a review of the FA decision that upheld those penalties. The external tribunal

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established to consider the appeal ruled that football had imposed too harsh a sanction on Tottenham and the club was handed back its points.

Middlesbrough lost three points for what the FA acknowledged was an

"honest error of judgment made in good faith."

How on earth can that be compared with the view that points had been unfairly deducted from Tottenham when the club had acted illegally? Against the background of the Tottenham precedent, should not football afford Middlesbrough the same opportunity to have its case reviewed by the same body—if not, why not? Why will the Premier League not answer the questions that have been put to it? Many of those questions were not addressed by the Premier League commission or the FA board of appeal. Do they have something to hide?

I ask the new chief executive of the Premier League, Mr. Peter Lever QC, and the chairman, Sir John Quinton, to offer voluntarily to answer in full all the questions raised by the press, the people of Teesside and Members of Parliament. If, when those questions are answered fully and honestly, it is obvious that Middlesbrough should be afforded the same opportunities as Tottenham, the FA should submit its answers to an external body that would review all the facts surrounding events on and after 20 December 1996.

I said at the start of my speech that I have no financial interest in the issue, and that is correct. However, for more than 45 years, my life has been affected by the ups and downs of the team that on Teesside we all know as "the Boro".

I was involved with the club in a part-time capacity for 18 years assessing future opponents' tactics and I was honoured to learn a great deal about the game from Jack Charlton, Harold Shepherdson, Malcolm Allison and many others.

I have been very fortunate; I have lived a varied, sometimes difficult, life, but it has always been fascinating and interesting. I have been lucky enough—at least until 1992 when I was elected to Parliament—to have a proper job all my life. It must be remembered that in areas like Teesside and other areas where heavy industries are experiencing a dreadful demise, many people live their lives through the football teams that they support. Their self-esteem is often drawn from their local team's success.

Although Steve Gibson, the chairman of Middlesbrough, is a hero to the people of Teesside, we must not regard this issue as a battle between well-paid lawyers and football administrators. We must remember that we are not involved in some academic discourse about the value and merits of the importation of foreign stars. To many people, this issue does not involve just their income or jobs but is their main interest in life, and they deserve much better from Lancaster gate and from all of us here today.

12.10 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I welcome today's debate. It is vital that everyone has access to quality sporting facilities at affordable prices. I am pleased that the Secretary of State has said that that will be a priority for the new Government.

The benefits of sport in terms of health, outlook and just pure enjoyment are immeasurable and are important for our whole society, irrespective of other concerns that we may have about sport in our country today, such as how many gold medals Britain wins at the Olympics. As a new member of the House of Commons gymnasium, I intend soon to reap those benefits and to begin practising what I am preaching today. I only hope that my intention makes its way past the less healthy temptations that this place has to offer.

I wish briefly to bring to the Minister's attention an issue that poses a significant danger to sports in Britain. It is highlighted by a recent judicial ruling in Kingston Crown court, which threatens sports clubs throughout the country and which could be about to affect local sports clubs in the constituencies of all hon. Members. Put simply, it is a loophole in the law that enables landlords of sports clubs to demolish the club and plough up the sports fields, even though they may have been refused planning permission to construct other buildings on the land.

The Minister will be aware of that problem, as I gave his office notice that I would raise the issue. My interest in the matter stems from the case of Thames Ditton lawn tennis club, founded in 1882, which is one of the oldest lawn tennis clubs in the world. That famous tennis club is situated in the constituency of the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) and is used by many of my constituents as it lies close to the boundary of the Kingston and Surbiton constituency. Indeed, many of its leading lights are my constituents. The hon. Member for Esher and Walton has taken a close interest in this issue and has worked hard to resolve the unfortunate circumstances in which the tennis club finds itself. Although he cannot be present at this debate, he wishes to continue pursuing the case.

Like so many local sports clubs, Thames Ditton lawn tennis club is thriving. It has 473 members, including 141 juniors. It provides opportunities for everyone to enjoy tennis at an affordable price. It has free coaching sessions for juniors and intermediates. The facilities include six tournament grass courts and four tournament-sized hard courts, with a clubhouse and associated facilities. It is exactly the sort of community club that provides sport for all and is the backbone of sporting life in our country. The problems that it faces have national ramifications, as is recognised by a wide variety of bodies, including the English Sports Council and the Lawn Tennis Association. The club's plight has received national media cover in *The Daily Telegraph*, from the word processor of Donald Trelford, and in that excellent magazine "Tennis Today".

I shall give a few details of the case, to illustrate the extraordinary course of events that has led the tennis club to face the prospect of demolition. In essence, it is a dispute between the club and the trustees who act for the owner and landlord. When the lease came up for renewal, the trust was unwilling either to renew it or to sell the freehold to the club's members. Instead, it and its beneficiary were keen to plough up the tennis courts and develop the land for luxury housing.

At first, the trust was thwarted. Elmbridge council turned down planning applications for housing on the site twice, because of the potential loss of leisure facilities to the community, and that decision was strongly backed by

the whole local community. Indeed, the Government's planning inspector refused an appeal by the owner on the ground that the proposal

"would cause harm by the loss of recreational space".

One would have thought that that would be an end of the matter, and that the trust would give in and renew the lease or sell the land. It did indeed offer the land for sale, but the trustees said that during the dispute it had increased in value from £425,000 to £1.5 million. I think that they were a little surprised when the club was prepared to consider that price, having been assured by the Sports Council that it could qualify for national lottery money. Not to be outdone, however, the trustees came back with another wheeze. They proposed to demolish the whole club and leave the site derelict for years, then apply again for planning permission for housing, having turned the site into a local eyesore.

The issue ended in Kingston Crown court, where Judge Bishop ruled in favour of the trustees and the owner, arguing that in law the grass courts could, technically, be demolished. Unless the subsequent appeal by the tennis club is won, or the Government act quickly, the tennis club will be destroyed.

I invite all hon. Members to consider which sporting facilities in their constituencies could be threatened in similar circumstances. We should remember that the Victorians and Edwardians established many sporting clubs throughout the country at the turn of the century, and those leases are now coming up for renewal.

Perhaps other landlords or trusts would behave less avariciously—but can we afford to rely on that? With the property market booming, it would be unwise to do so. I am told that Judge Bishop's ruling is already being cited by developers as giving the green light for building on recreational spaces elsewhere in London and the rest of the country.

It is difficult to estimate the scale of the problem, but common sense suggests that it will be widespread and could prove catastrophic for the sporting life of our country. I ask Ministers to examine the problem of Thames Ditton lawn tennis club as a matter of urgency, because it has national significance.

I believe that potential solutions are available. I am told by legal specialists that options could include amendments to either the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 or the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954. Ministers here today would, of course, have to consult colleagues before taking action, but I urge them to do so without delay.

Ministers could set up an interdepartmental study group to find out how the problem could be tackled as soon as possible. Perhaps a requirement to obtain prior planning permission could be imposed on landlords who wish to demolish or reconstruct a building connected with sport or other recreational pursuits.

The Town and Country Planning Act 1990 provides that planning permission is not required to demolish

"any building other than a dwellinghouse or a building adjoining a dwellinghouse".

It is for that reason that the demolition of the Thames Ditton clubhouse and the ploughing up of its land can proceed without the need for prior approval. One solution would be to amend legislation to cover land used for sports and/or built sports facilities. I am sure that Ministers and officials can propose more suitable solutions, and I recognise that they must proceed with some caution.

There are genuine concerns about the need to protect the property rights of landlords, so any legal change must be considered carefully, but I urge Ministers not to use the issue of property rights to avoid dealing with this case, as their predecessors did. I do not believe that the Thames Ditton case—and others which may follow if this is used as a legal precedent—is really a question of property rights; rather, it is a case of an unscrupulous and greedy landlord, deliberately and openly in court saying that he intends to flout the spirit of the rulings of a planning authority. There is a big difference between the legitimate concerns of landlords and the exploitation of legal loopholes for property speculation.

Sport for all means that we have to protect the facilities in our constituencies to allow people to participate in sport. I urge the Minister to light up the lives of many tennis fans and players during this Wimbledon fortnight by announcing positive action by the Government to save this club and, by doing so, to save many sporting facilities across the country. The Minister has a warm following among fans of all sports and I am sure that, if the animals that will benefit from saving open spaces could speak in human tongue, they would also voice their affection for him. This case offers him a chance to match our expectations of him, and I hope that he will seize it with his usual flair.

12.20 pm

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): I hope that the House will allow me to express my appreciation at being called to make my maiden speech in this debate.

My constituency is situated in east London, as is betrayed by my classic cockney accent. The River Thames forms its southern boundary, and it is bounded by Shadwell in the west and north Woolwich in the east. It is surrounded by the constituencies of East Ham, West Ham—of which more later—and Bethnal Green and Bow. Poplar and Canning Town is the new creation of the boundary commission and, for the first time in history, a parliamentary constituency crosses the age-old boundary between Middlesex and Essex, by covering an area separated by the River Lea.

My immediate predecessors were Mildred Gordon and Nigel Spearing, who had more than 30 years of parliamentary service between them. They had distinctly different styles, but were acknowledged as assiduous representatives of their constituents and doughty fighters for the causes they held dear. I will do well to become as highly regarded as a parliamentary performer and to be thought of by my constituents with as much affection as they were. They were also sources of great assistance to me in preparation for the general election, and I thank them for that.

Other predecessors include Keir Hardie, George Lansbury, Elwyn Jones, Ian Mikardo and Clement Attlee, to name a few, and the constituency has a history of industrial and community activity which reads like a history of the Labour movement, stretching back beyond the great dock strike of 1889. The area was heavily bombed during the blitz, and more recently—following the closure of the docks in London—we saw the arrival

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of the London Docklands development corporation, which heralded a new era. It must be said that the LDDC was not wholly welcomed, because of its non-elected basis, and even today it arouses an element of frustration and anger, but it is appropriate to say that it has laid the foundations for the future, and many people who have worked for the LDDC have been driven by the highest motives. Their achievements are certainly visible.

With all respect to my right hon. and hon. Friends who represent other London constituencies, east London in general—and Poplar and Canning Town in particular—holds the key to the future of London. The elected councillors and officers of the London boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Newham are working hard to ensure that. Voluntary and community groups across the constituency, backed by our well-known local newspapers the *Newham Recorder* and the *East London Advertiser*, are also doing all they can to participate.

In Poplar and Canning Town, we have many famous organisations and buildings, including Billingsgate fish market with its 1,000-year history—it relocated to the Isle of Dogs in 1982—and Canary Wharf, with the tower at 1 Canada square being the symbol of the brave new London. Around half of what was Fleet street now works there. A more imaginative home for the strategic authority for London and the new mayor would be hard to find outside docklands, or indeed, Canary Wharf.

In east London, we will have the Stratford international rail link and the Jubilee line extension, and we already have the bus and tube networks, the docklands light railway and the City airport—in essence, the basic transport infrastructure to support the regeneration that is so needed. As I am sure the House knows, Poplar and Canning Town also has levels of poverty, overcrowding and unemployment as serious as those anywhere in the United Kingdom.

East London, which is the gateway to Europe, needs the investment promised by the new Labour Government. The business community and the City are ready to respond and, indeed, have been investing. Labour swept to power throughout east London and in acknowledging the multifarious talents of my many successful colleagues, I must pay tribute to the professional and voluntary staff of the Greater London Labour party under the guidance of Mr. Terry Ashton.

In my previous occupation as a firefighter, mostly at Battersea fire station, a certain level of physical and mental fitness was necessary. The sporting opportunities afforded to firefighters by the London fire brigade contributed to maintaining that fitness and building the team spirit that are so important in that profession. I am glad to say that, since entering Parliament, I have managed to continue the link between sport and work by being selected for the parliamentarians football team—as was my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Mr. Keen)—which played the press lobby on Wednesday. Some people consider the term "left wing" an anachronism in new Labour, so perhaps our manager for the match, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe), selected me for that position on the field because I was formerly a lay official of the Fire Brigades Union.

While on the subject of football, I feel that I should declare an interest, in that I am a West Ham season ticket holder. If my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) feels that he is not receiving value for money—I can sympathise, given the price that he says he is paying for his season ticket—I point out that the provisions of the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 are always available to people in Sheffield.

West Ham United football club is an institution of which we are rightly proud in east London. I hasten to add, for clarification and so as not to cause an unfortunate association for the Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage—my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), whose appointment as Minister for sport was so warmly welcomed—that Upton park, the Boleyn ground, which is the home of West Ham football club, is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms) and not West Ham.

The concept of sport for all is about everyone having access to the physical, social and psychological benefits of sport. It is about whether the Government's involvement in sport encourages not merely competitiveness but community, and not merely elitism but social engagement. It is also about whether Government or lottery funds go to the disabled, the elderly and the isolated, or only to the elite band of prospective medal winners. Millions of people are included under the banner "Sport for All".

As for the proposed academy of sport, the former Member for Harwich, Mr. Sproat, favoured an academy that would have been a centre of excellence on Australian lines. I shall not comment on the present test series. I know that I would not pass the Tebbit cricket test, as I have to confess that I do not always support an English win—a number of charities have been the occasional beneficiaries of Scottish defeats.

Previously, some people appeared to be working to inhibit the Sports Council in influencing the development and management of the proposed British academy. In May last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) challenged the previous Government on their proposals for the academy, saying:

"It was another sad indication of the government's failure to listen, when last year it announced it wanted to see a single large Academy of Sport—despite the fact that this is not what British sport wants."

He went on to say:

"I believe Government must provide a framework for sporting excellence which is open to all."

He favoured a single headquarters with an enhanced regional network, encouraging grass-roots participation.

General practitioners, social services and counsellors in the field of psychiatry should all be involved in referring people to local gyms, dance classes and other recreational facilities so that each and every one of us can enjoy the benefits of exercise. There are interpersonal and recreational benefits from participation in sport, as well as genuine mental and physical benefits.

In the true spirit of sport, participation in and following of sport as a fan or supporter can help to transcend differences of race, gender, class and physical ability, and can afford enjoyment, hope and a sense of achievement and help to develop a sense of responsibility, perseverance and fair play. We are beginning to build a society based on those values, and sport for all can be a building block of that society.

12.30 pm

Mr. Ronnie Fearn (Southport): I congratulate the new hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick). I had to note down the name of his constituency, as I was not sure about it. I have driven through it, but next time I shall certainly stop, having found out the delights of the area and especially that Billingsgate market is in it; I have never been there and I should like to see it.

As a Member of Parliament who has returned to the House after a five-year absence, I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. The Member who kept the seat warm for me, Mr. Matthew Banks, did a remarkable job. He was a good constituency Member and was active on the Transport Select Committee; he also had an interest in the middle east. He often spoke on those matters and, although I am glad that I am here in his stead, I appreciate all that he did for Southport.

As I said in my original maiden speech, quite some years ago, Southport is a town of 100,000 people. Within that 100,000, there are many sportspeople—men, women and children. We have eight golf clubs, and one would think from that that Southport was a rather select place to live. Well, it is: it is a seaside resort. The eight golf clubs have a great tradition of encouraging junior members who, although rarely spoken of, have played a part in promoting English golf; some have gone on to international standard, as other juniors have in swimming and athletics. Southport has a place in any debate on sport.

Southport has a tradition of football, and I have the honour—I think—of holding one of the original Southport football club share certificates, which is due for a museum. The club is in the Vauxhall league and climbing slowly; by a great deal of effort from members and supporters, as well as from grant systems, it has been able to build a new sports ground after a disastrous fire some years ago. The club is also looking to youngsters and trying to form a partnership with a nearby school, using its facilities for training.

I remain a member of the leisure services committee of Sefton council, which includes Southport. As a councillor for the past 30 years, I have been able to see the frustration of councillors and officers who have tried and failed and left the council—we have people in leisure services at the moment who are doing remarkable work with the resources that are available—because the funding is not there. It is all very well talking about sport for all, producing glossy brochures and having a strategy, but most leisure services committees already have strategies. Our council had a strategy for some time, which it has renewed but cannot carry out because funding is not provided under the standard spending assessment.

Leisure might be described as a Cinderella service in terms of local authority funding. Social services, education and many other aspects take precedence. A directive to councils may be necessary to ensure that a certain proportion of funding is set aside for leisure services. That is the only way that we shall get even the grass cut. Some authorities are so strapped for cash that they cut the grass much less often. Education departments are struggling to put their sports fields in order, rather than sell them. It is all right having sport for all, but from where will the resources come?

Consultation with the sports councils has been mentioned. I was a member of the North West Council for Sport and Recreation and I am now a member of Sefton's sports council. There has been great debate and dissension in those councils because of their rearrangement by the previous Government. As a member, I do not think that they work. I hope that, after consultations, that strategy will be directed, if not towards another reorganisation, towards a method of getting younger members who are really interested in sport involved in the sports councils. Education must be considered more often in that context. It may be that this is now said of me, but I have found over the years that the sports councils have many elderly members. We need fresh ideas. The disabled sections of sport are encouraging many of their junior members, such as those who have been through the Olympics, to become part of the sports councils. They have a different view from that of the older generation on the councils.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) said that she thought that Camelot was doing a good job. I agree. Before, during and after the general election campaign there was a lot of controversy and we all jumped on to the bandwagon of shouting about fat cats and their salaries. The amount that Camelot gives away—gives away because it has to under the regulations—shows that it is doing an exceedingly good job. Not counting the big money projects, in any constituency, anyone who attended a sports council meeting would see how many sports grants were being made through the sports councils because of Camelot's decisions. I hope that its contract will be renewed in 2001. Perhaps Virgin or another company is waiting in the wings, but so far Camelot has done a very good job, if we put aside the salary business.

Many aspects of sport could be discussed. Athletes often have the limelight. That can be good because it makes for good television, good sport and even good radio. The athletics world has quite a position to hold but, outside that, there are struggling athletics clubs. I am president of the Southport and Waterloo athletic club which has been working for 15 years to try to get a running track. Bakatrak is the trusteeship that was formed to bring in funding, but we are still £150,000 short of providing what is needed in that part of Merseyside. Those efforts will continue. The club has raised a fair amount of money, but the membership comes and goes. As the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) said, parents take an interest while their young people are interested, but we need to hold their interest.

Mention was made of the coaching side. Coaches can be held only if they have a true interest. We should try to keep coaches in many organisations, especially in athletics. That can be done only by encouragement, through achieving long-life ambitions such as that to provide a running track. Again, a local authority contribution is needed and standard spending assessments must be re-examined.

We recently started the Merseyside youth games. I had quite a deal to do with them as a local councillor working through leisure services. More than 1,000 youngsters from all regions of Merseyside take part. They have a great day. They think of the games as their Olympics. They have a parade at the beginning and at the end. Everyone works not to win but to take part. We have controversy only about boxing at the moment. The young people enjoy the games and that is what sport is all about.

If we can preserve events such as the Merseyside youth games, encourage them and let sponsorship be forthcoming from private organisations as it is for the

[Mr. Ronnie Fearn]

Manchester games, there is a future for this country, but we have to look to the funding. I have received 22 brochures on sport for all, and one was even called "Sport for All", but they have all gathered dust. I want to see action and the action lies in providing the resources for sport.

12.41 pm

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I am thrilled to be here this morning. I am thrilled to be making my maiden speech. I am thrilled to be making it on sport. That is probably enough about being thrilled. I am one of the 80 or so unlikely lads and lasses who won on 1 May and I am still shaking from that success. As there are so many of us, we have formed a Back-Bench committee called the unlikely lads and lasses and we are proud to announce that the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) is to be our president.

My constituency is a brand new constituency, so I guess I am brand new Labour. My constituency is Sittingbourne and Sheppey on the north Kent coast. Sheppey has Anglo-Saxon origins. Hon. Members can probably work out that Sheppey is the long form for sheep. It was joined to the island—or to the United Kingdom, I should say—only in the 19th century. We have for ever had a problem about the bridge connecting the island to the mainland. It is no real surprise that we have the highest number of home births in the United Kingdom, for people in the Isle of Sheppey fear the mainland.

When I went to the island after I had won, I was thrilled to see an 8 ft sign as I crossed the bridge saying, "Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Sheppey—a Tory-Free zone". The islanders have their own sense of humour. When we were campaigning for a new bridge, for which we shall continue to campaign, we had to come up to London to see the then shadow Transport Minister. Unfortunately, she was relieved of her duties the day before we were due to see her earlier this year. I had to ring all the Sheppey industry people and chamber of commerce people to say, "I am so sorry, but unfortunately the lady we were due to see is no longer there. She has been removed to overseas development." The reply was, "Great, why don't we go to see her?" That is the island mentality. I must do more to bring its people more to the mainland. The new bridge will help.

We have had three different Members of Parliament since the war. In 1945, much like in 1997, there was a shock when the Labour man, Percy Wells, won. Percy was a truly great constituency Member. He finished up as parliamentary private secretary to Aneurin Bevan. One of his great brags—sadly he is no longer with us—was that no matter how many late sittings there were, he always made it home to Sittingbourne. Alas, I have failed to do so and I am already in his debt.

When Percy gave over the seat in 1964, it was won by Terry Boston, who retained it until 1970. He now resides in another place. Terry was Minister of Power between 1966 and 1968 and Minister of Transport between 1968 and 1969. I am counting on his support.

For the past 27 years, the former seat of Faversham was represented by Sir Roger Moate. Sir Roger won eight consecutive elections, which is going it, and I guess that we would all be pretty pleased if we could do that. Barring the 1997 election, he increased his majority, which is a tribute to his work in the constituency. He was made a Companion of Honour in Norway and I know that he is a great skier. He certainly misses the House.

I am overwhelmed to be able to make my maiden speech on sport, because it has been an important part of my life since the age of eight and it is something that I do nearly every day. I should like to take this opportunity to welcome the various Front-Bench spokesmen to the debate. It would be helpful if there were some spokeswomen, but we look forward to that. I especially welcome the Secretary of State. I made a mistake during the election campaign, because when I wrote to him as shadow Secretary of State for Health about a private finance initiative about which I needed some help, I put in that letter, "PS: we miss you at shadow heritage." I am really thrilled that he has now returned to that Department because his work as shadow spokesman was outstanding. I am sure that he will continue in the same vein.

I am also thrilled at the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks) as Minister for sport. I hope that he will be more Charlie Cook than Chopper Harris. I am sad that my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Mr. Pendry) is not present because he did sterling work as a shadow spokesman on sport, and he has helped me in the past.

As I have already said, sport plays a critical part in my life. One of my proudest moments came when I formed the Women's Sports Foundation in my offices in 1984. I paid for its next three meetings and three lunches. Given that the membership went from 10 to 40, that was some expense on my pocket. I was not too pleased when, having suggested the formation of the group and set up some of the early finance, I was told at the third meeting, "Excuse me, but you're a man and we can't have you here."

The Women's Sports Foundation has gone from strength to strength and it now has full-time officers and members. It has funding from the Sports Council and I am thrilled to see it prospering, although there is still much to be done.

Perhaps I am most proud of launching the Campaign for Fair Play in 1985, which was designed to stop the Lions tour to South Africa. That lobby group consisted of various sportsmen and sports writers, such as John Arlott, Frank Keating, Mike Brearley, Peter Roebuck and Vic Marks, and even players—I count myself in that category. We lobbied to prevent a tour to a country run, according to my book, by the most disgusting Government who have lived this century. I am thrilled that we will be playing South Africa at Twickenham in November and I hope that Nelson Mandela will be there.

If we look at the role of sport in society, we could say that we created it. The Brits like to think that they created sport, but so do the French. Curiously the World cup for football is named after a Frenchman, Jules Rimet, and the Olympics were formed by Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Although we like to think that we created sport, we are party to a larger sporting tradition and history.

My sadness is that when, in 1946, we formed the United Nations Educational, Scientifc and Cultural Organisation—UNESCO—it did not develop its work on sport. Now that Britain is to rejoin it on 1 July and the British flag is to fly again at Paris, I hope that we will be able to put pressure on UNESCO to develop its work in that respect.

We now need to rein in the international bodies that purport to represent sport. It is hard to find published financing for what the International Olympic Committee does and the same is true of FIFA. Incredibly, the International Amateur Athletics Federation moved from just behind Harrods to Monaco—another tax-free zone. Those three major sporting bodies are hardly accountable to anybody in the world except themselves and we must give renewed leadership to those three areas. In my own sport—rugby union—I am saddened to see that the chairman of the International Rugby Football Board is also chairman of the Welsh Rugby Football Union. I wonder whether he can have two caps and hold them both successfully. The administration of sport is relatively new in politics—it was not there in 1946 and it was relatively new in the 1970s and 1980s. We therefore have much to do.

I do not know what sport for all means. As a competitor and a father, I know that everybody has their own gold medal level and that is what we must aspire to and offer this country's citizens. I was interested to hear that Conservative Members believe that the academy of sport was a Conservative idea. If they look through the archive, they might be surprised to see my 1993 paper which set out the idea and how it could be achieved, and invited Iain Sproat to visit the National Institute of Sport at Canberra. Because the subject is bipartisan, I am pleased to hear Opposition Members say that it will not be made too political.

The academy is needed, but I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to rethink one aspect. At present, the organisation of sport is shambolic. We have far too many national and regional heads of sports councils, coaching organisations and sports institutions. We need a single body—one gold medal centre. The academy of sport could be that centre; it could be the national and international centre to which people go as a one-stop shop. That is what I want my hon. Friend to tell me will happen in the near future.

I also want my hon. Friend to give renewed thought to a matter that has been missing from all the applications so far and which has not been discussed much in public—a virtual academy of sport. We have a fantastic sporting library at Birmingham university, but it is hard to get access to it. If we were able to put it on-line, everybody in the country could have immediate access to it. Several different plans relating to technology, such as putting schools on e-mail, are currently going through the House, so I hope my hon. Friend will look at how we could get all the national institutes of sport—Lilleshall, Plas-y-Brenin and all the rest—on-line and connected. The technology exists to allow everyone access to the centres of excellence.

It is curious that the Secretary of State said that many of us are fat and unfit, whatever age we are, and I confess that I probably fit into that category. When in 1914 my grandfather signed up to fight in the first world war, one in five at the age of 15 failed the fitness test. We do not seem to have got far in 80 years; that is an unhappy statistic. The Secretary of State should look at how the Chinese medical system works, because there may be lesson for us there. In China, people pay the doctor if they are well, but stop if they become unwell. It is a good system which works very well in China. We go on about creating new bureaucracies, talking about new change and claiming new vision, but sometimes a simple change like that can transform a nation.

On the Middlesbrough issue, it is appalling that there has not been an open court hearing to determine whether the team should have had three points deducted. Steve Gibson is one of the most ambitious chief executives in the country—I would use the word visionary if I did not overuse that word. Middlesbrough already runs homework clubs for its kids. The club already gets its old players back to coach kids. It is, I would say, a model premier league team—if only. The court case was almost a kangaroo affair. If the Premier League has nothing to hide, why does it not allow an independent inquiry? Hon. Members should push for it.

On tobacco sponsorship, let me say that, between the ages of 12 and 26 I was asthmatic—sometimes taken to hospital and sometimes taken to accident and emergency units to be kept in overnight. Both my parents smoked between 40 and 60 cigarettes a day. If it were not for the brilliance of Bart's hospital in London I would not be here, because its staff saved my life.

Tobacco sponsorship is a disgrace. It is disgusting. We should have no truck with it. The suggestion that there will be a shortage of money for sports sponsorship shows how unaware people are of the number of organisations that are queuing to sponsor sport. It is the sexiest thing on television, and they are queuing up to sponsor it.

The sooner we get rid of tobacco sponsorship, the better. Tobacco companies use it purely to promote brand awareness. Why do they want brand awareness? So that people will remember the brand when they enter a shop to buy the product. It is a shame that tobacco companies have been allowed to play so long in sport and I look forward to their abolition.

I want to ask the Secretary of State two related questions. In France, where sport is not run from schools, there is a different system, based on a connection between the school and the local authority sports centre. We are asking a physical education teacher to be a gold medal specialist in 18 to 20 sports. How can he do that? The answer is to connect schools to the local centre. *[Interruption.]* I am being thwarted here. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have much more that I should like— *[Interruption.]* Mr. Deputy Speaker, perhaps I should sit down.

12.56 pm

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): As I may at some point stray on to the issue of rugby league, I should perhaps declare an interest. I have 500 shares in Wakefield Trinity rugby league football club. I am also joint secretary of the all-party parliamentary rugby league group, although I shall not necessarily reflect its policy on a number of points that I intend to make.

I congratulate all those who have made their maiden speech this morning. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) made an excellent speech and I am sure that he will do a first-class job for that constituency. I welcome back the hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Fearn), whom I know from when he was previously a Member of the House; I know that he is greatly respected in his constituency. I visit Southport regularly to see a relative and I know how well thought of he is in that town.

It is a particular pleasure for me to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt), who has just made a first-class maiden

[Mr. David Hinchliffe]

speech. I wish him well in his work in this place. I have known him for several years and I pay tribute to the honourable role that he played as a supporter of rugby union in bringing about a modicum of decency on several issues in that sport. I shall mention one or two more points in that respect later. He was too modest to mention the fact that on one occasion he played for the England rugby union team. He would have real credibility if he played rugby league, but perhaps it is not too late for him.

I wish to make a couple of brief points about my new constituency, because the boundary commission kindly carved up my old one. It is an honour for me to represent several rural areas of Kirklees, near Huddersfield and Wakefield, where there is a great sporting tradition. They look north to Huddersfield—to Huddersfield Town, to Huddersfield Giants rugby league club, and to the great McAlpine stadium, a perfect example of municipal enterprise. I commend Kirklees council for that initiative.

Also in my constituency is Emley association football club, a great non-league football club with a great cup-fighting tradition; Emley Moor rugby league club; and numerous village cricket teams—including Lascelles Hall—with a great cricketing tradition.

While I am mentioning cricket, I should say that I hope that the new Government will pay attention to the decision to relocate Yorkshire county cricket club from Headingley in Leeds to my constituency of Wakefield, outside the metropolitan boundary of Leeds. That has been a very popular decision throughout Yorkshire. The decision has been made against the background of a quite vicious campaign by the regional media based in Leeds for county cricket to remain at Headingley. I have a personal affinity with the Headingley ground, but I understand the logic of the decision made by Yorkshire county cricket club, and I support it.

Investment in an area such as Wakefield has been devastated as a consequence of the previous Government's policies—20,000 jobs were lost in the mining industry. The economic importance of an investment of this nature must not be overlooked. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister understands the clear connection between sport and the economy in Wakefield.

Another key development in my constituency is of great relevance to the debate, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey knows. Wakefield rugby union football club and Wakefield Trinity rugby league football club have decided jointly to develop a new ground that they will share. Bearing in mind the battle that we have had in the House over many years to end the appalling relationship between rugby union and rugby league, it is commendable that such an initiative has been taken in Wakefield. I wish that venture well, and I will actively support it.

I want to praise Wakefield rugby union football club in particular for its courage in going along with this decision against the opinions of some in the higher echelons of rugby union. I hope that Wakefield rugby union does well next season under the director of coaching, Jim Kilfoyle, whose brother is my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle).

I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks) in his new position as Minister for sport, but I am concerned that in my area he is perceived as a London-based soccer man who knows little about some of the activities north of Watford. I hope that he will come north, because I know that he takes his brief seriously and listens to what people say. I make a plea that, when he sits in the stand at Stamford Bridge watching his favourite team and sees some of the misbehaviour that there has been over the years at soccer grounds, he thinks about the impact that that has had on other sports. Rugby league and a number of other sports have been shafted as a direct consequence of the problems at soccer grounds. We have had to deal with the consequences of problems that were not of our making.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister understands my bitterness about the cost to sports such as rugby league of attempting to implement legislation that has resulted from the problems of association football. I do not object to implementing that legislation, but although the £55 million going to soccer is welcome, I hope that a few crumbs from the table may go to those sports that have had to pick up the tab for hooliganism and thuggery in soccer grounds. I object to the arrangement with the police that spectators will not move at half time from one end of the ground to the other. That was common practice in rugby league grounds, and it always happened without any trouble whatsoever. That arrangement has been required by the police on the basis of soccer's problems, not rugby league's.

I also object strongly that my home team of Wakefield Trinity has had to change from playing on Sunday afternoons to playing on Saturday evenings to accommodate policing difficulties at Elland road. Such consequences of the difficulties in soccer anger many people involved in rugby league. I hope that my hon. Friend will take that point as it is meant: it is not a criticism of him, and we hope that he will respond to it.

There is an urgent need for sports other than soccer to be given help with ground improvements. The previous Government's sports ground initiative through the Foundation for Sport and the Arts offered some assistance, but it has nowhere near dealt with the problems that clubs have faced. Wakefield Trinity had to demolish its main stand and resources were not available from any source through the new funding arrangements to replace it.

With the all-party parliamentary rugby league group, I have campaigned for many years to rid the game of tobacco sponsorship. Our finest occasion—the Challenge cup final at Wembley, which I hope the Minister will attend next year—is currently sponsored by Silk Cut. I think that that reflects badly on a fine sport which offers a great spectacle and which is played by brilliant sportsmen and, indeed, women. I wholeheartedly back the Government's action in moving away from tobacco sponsorship, but I make a special plea for rugby league.

As a Member of Parliament for about 10 years who is in London for at least part of the week, I am aware that rugby league is perceived by many people down here as a northern, working-class sport, perhaps because of its honourable origins in that it took the honest road towards payments in 1895 rather than use under-the-counter arrangements as happened in rugby union. We have been honest about payments—working-class people were compensated for loss of earnings when they played. It took rugby union 100 years to come around to our way of thinking, but it got there eventually.

Having said that, I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to re-examine the issue of tobacco sponsorship of sports such as rugby league. I hope that he understands the particular difficulties facing rugby league in replacing existing tobacco sponsorship with money from, for example, the financial sector when the image portrayed of the game by some newspapers is grossly inaccurate. A little while ago, Michael Herd said in the *Evening Standard* that rugby league was perceived as being

"played by ape-like creatures, watched by gloomy men in cloth caps".

If that is the image of our sport that reaches people in the City, the Minister will probably understand that there may be some difficulty attracting sponsorship from other sectors.

The Minister has attended debates on discrimination against rugby league players, so he will know that the prejudice against rugby league is deeply ingrained. It affects the way in which the sport can look to the future and bring on board sponsorship from credible companies other than tobacco companies.

The prejudice manifests itself within the education system. I failed my 11-plus. Had I passed it, I would have played rugby union, but because I failed it I played rugby league. One of the nice things about failing was that I ended up playing rugby league. I reached the age of 19 and discovered that I could not play rugby union because I played rugby league and, as far as I am aware, I am still banned from rugby union. It has not caused me any great distress, but it has added to the chips that I carry on both shoulders and perhaps lessens my enjoyment and appreciation of the achievements of the British Lions—although I note that it is the ex-rugby league players who have been delivering the tries, and all credit to them.

Another problem was that of the ban in the armed forces. The only reason rugby union, rather than rugby league, spread across the world was that the British forces took it with them. Of course, until two years ago, the forces banned the game of rugby league. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's predecessor, Iain Sproat, for his efforts to remove the ban and deal with discrimination.

There are many other issues that I should like to mention, but I am aware that other hon. Members wish to speak. I shall briefly mention the involvement of Mr. Murdoch and BSkyB in the sport and the way the super league has come about. I am on record in the House as being opposed to the way the game has gone, effectively in the ownership of the Murdoch organisation. I am concerned about the impact on the game in Australia, where the code has been split between two organisations, and on the development of the game worldwide. I am unhappy about the move to playing in the summer and the use of terms such as Blue Sox added to the names of famous clubs such as Halifax. I recall telling the husband of my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) that his team, which he has supported for nearly 60 years, was going to be called Blue Sox. We had to carry him out of the Strangers' Bar in a state of distress and he has not yet recovered.

I am also concerned about the impact of such changes on clubs outside the super league—those in the first and second divisions which have been allowed to wither on the vine. According to the official figures, the super league has increased attendances by about 25 per cent., but that is not reflected in the first and second divisions. I am also very concerned about the continuing dialogue on mergers involving such great clubs as Featherstone Rovers, Wakefield Trinity and Castleford.

I want to end on two positive points. I have mentioned some negative aspects because rugby league is going through one of those phases that happens occasionally in any sport when the game faces problems. Some of those problems can be dealt with by the game, such as the need to merge the governing bodies of the amateur and professional game. I desperately hope that that will happen, particularly in view of the bad results that British clubs have had in the world club championship matches against Australian sides.

I am pleased about the development of the game in the armed forces and in universities and colleges, as well as the women's game of rugby league. People do not normally associate rugby league with women, but it is a family sport. I am delighted to see so many women playing and enjoying the game.

Thanks to the new southern conference, places such as Kingston, which is represented in the House today, now have rugby league sides. Most hon. Members here today will have an amateur rugby league side in or near to their constituency. I want to praise the British Amateur Rugby League Association for the quality of the amateur game.

I wish my hon. Friend the Minister well in his work. I hope that he has listened to what I have said. If there is one sport that needs the concept of sport for all applied to it in broader terms, that sport is rugby league. The old school tie system and the old farts of sport have damaged our interests. I look to the new Labour Government to address the issue and to give rugby league a new deal.

1.10 pm

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): I congratulate my hon. Friends who have made maiden speeches this morning. I rise to give my maiden speech with a great sense of awe and some nervousness. All of us new Members are conscious that we are taking part in procedures that are rooted deep in the centuries of British history. On another occasion I may say what I think about some of the ways in which we carry out our business in this House, but today I shall follow normal practice by being brief and uncontroversial.

I start by paying tribute to my immediate predecessor, Tristan Garel-Jones. He stood down at the recent election, having served as the Member for Watford for the entire 18 years of Conservative government. Whenever I met him, I found him an amusing and convivial adversary who always did his best for his constituents. Without straying across the boundaries of controversy, I am bound to say that his commitment to the European ideal would not sit happily with the new Conservative leadership. Had he remained in Parliament, Mr. Garel-Jones would have been like one of the lost boys in "Peter Pan" who fell out of the perambulator when the nurses were looking the other way. If nobody claimed them in seven days, they were sent to never never land. Wisely, Tristan has opted for Spain rather than the never never land occupied by the Conservative party. I wish him well in his retirement and hope that he sends me a postcard from time to time.

Tristan Garel-Jones's immediate predecessor was Sir Raphael Tuck, the longest-serving Labour Member for Watford so far. He was a much loved figure in the town. I am often reminded by my older constituents that

[Ms Claire Ward]

his example gives me a lot to live up to. Sadly, Sir Raphael is no longer alive, but a distinguished earlier Member for Watford, John Freeman, is still with us. He won the seat in the 1945 Labour landslide, when he stood in uniform as Major Freeman, having signed up as a private in the Coldstream Guards in 1940. He served as a Minister in the Attlee Government and resigned with Harold Wilson over health service charges in 1951. After leaving Parliament in 1955, John Freeman became a broadcaster, journalist, business man, academic and diplomat, serving as editor of the *New Statesman*, high commissioner in India and ambassador in Washington.

Watford is a town of immense diversity. It contains areas of well above average affluence, but there are three wards in the borough that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' index of local conditions defines as having relatively high levels of deprivation. It is a town rich in culture, history and life. When people think of Watford, they tend to mention paper, brewing and Watford Junction station. Occasionally, a few also mention our football club. Brewing has largely disappeared, except for a few pubs that brew their own beer, but paper is still an important industry in the town. The first printing company set up its presses in Watford in 1834. Since then, it has been the home of many famous—and some infamous—printing companies. Sun Printers and Odhams were there in the past and today 4 million copies of *The Mirror* and *The Independent* roll off the presses every night in Watford.

While everyone has heard of Watford Junction, not many realise that there are a further six railway stations in my constituency, served by a variety of train operators. My constituents will certainly be watching eagle-eyed to ensure that the firm line taken by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on putting passengers' interests first, insisting on tighter regulations and ensuring delivery of new investment is sustained.

Watford has another high-profile company—the national lottery operator, Camelot. Some 300 local people are employed there, and it is my duty to do the best for them. Judging by the experience of recent weeks, there will be difficult times ahead as the Government rightly press ahead with their plans to appoint a not-for-profit operator. For the sake of my constituents, I hope that Camelot rises to the challenge and shows that it is capable of running a people's lottery instead of one where the shareholders and directors are the principal beneficiaries.

In addition to the national lottery, national heritage embraces arts and sport, which are well represented in Watford. Leavesden studios—with Elstree nearby—are fast making the area Britain's Hollywood. They are the fastest growing film studios in the country. The site, which was once occupied by an aircraft factory, has unlimited potential, and there are hopes for a theme park and film-related developments.

The sports side of the heritage portfolio is represented by Watford football club, which is always a leading player in the provision of community-based facilities in the town and is now about to share its ground with Saracens rugby club. Despite the club missing promotion from the second division last season, hopes are high again with the return of Elton John as the club's owner and with Graham Taylor as manager. Can the glory days of the mid-1980s be recreated when, in 1984, Watford came so close to winning the FA cup? We certainly hope so.

Already, the new Government have given league football a marvellous shot in the arm with the recent announcement by my hon. Friend the Minister for sport of a £55 million cash injection for the Football Trust, which is doing so much to transform Britain's football grounds. I cannot comment on my hon. Friend's knowledge of activities north of Watford, but I am aware that he was Labour candidate for Watford in 1979 and I look forward to welcoming him to Vicarage Road next season. The trust has provided £3 million for rebuilding three sides of the ground and I shall be seeking substantial help, to enable the fourth and final side to be reconstructed.

The late Bill Shankly said that football was not a matter of life or death—it was more important than that. One does not have to agree completely with that view in recognising that sport plays a vital part in the lives of millions of British people—whether they are active participants, spectators or followers at home who listen avidly each week for news of how their football, rugby or cricket club has got on.

Swimming, hockey, basketball and tennis are also available to my constituents, and the borough council has a good record in supporting a variety of sport and leisure activities and in encouraging residents to participate in them. A recent agreement with the West Herts golf club has opened up access to local people keen to take up golf. The renowned Woodside stadium is also in Watford. Since its opening in 1953, its popularity has grown steadily and its regular meetings now attract up to 300 top athletes. Woodside is a stadium for record breakers. No fewer than four world records have been broken there and five British standards have been achieved in recent weeks.

For young people, the community benefits of sport are enormous, and the more our new Government can do to encourage participation among the young, the better will be our chances of tackling the social evils of rootlessness, drug dependence and despair. Sport offers alternatives to those evils, which lead to crime and other anti-social activities. I urge the Government to continue to attach the highest priority to developing sports policies that benefit everyone.

1.19 pm

Mr. Syd Rapson (Portsmouth, North): I wish to use this debate to bring to the attention of the House the largest sporting event to take place in the United Kingdom this year. First, however, I shall follow the tradition of saying a few nice words about my predecessor, Peter Griffiths. He was elected in 1964 for Smethwick; Harold Wilson made a statement about his character being tainted. He left Parliament and returned in 1979, having beaten Frank Judd. He always acted in a proper manner in the constituency and never turned down a constituent who went to him for advice. I hope that he has a long and well-deserved rest ahead of him. He was annoyed to be cut off in the prime of his political career, which is a bit strange at his age. He did nothing wrong towards us and I wish him well.

I come to this House after 26 years in local government, having sat on both Portsmouth city council and Portsmouth county council, but I still find this first

10 minutes of my speaking career daunting, albeit free of attack from the Opposition. I congratulate hon. Members on both Front Benches on their sartorial elegance this morning. Many of us are keeping our fingers crossed that the Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), will retain his job for as long as he wants it, especially given the forthcoming major sporting event.

I shall not give a Cook's tour of Portsmouth—if hon. Members do not know Portsmouth now, they never will—because the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) did so in his maiden speech a while ago. Instead, I shall reflect on the thousands of people who made Portsmouth great. Portsmouth has a naval history and is a premier port, but the thousands of people who built the ships are never given credit. Thousands were press-ganged into working on the ships, and those who died in conflict are never mentioned, while admirals such as Nelson are always acclaimed.

I also wish to mention the many thousands who work on the naval base, which is now to be privatised—a final nail in the coffin of the bad reputation of a sleazy dockyard town. Portsmouth has now changed completely. This week, the privatisation of the Fleet Maintenance Repair Organisation, which was initially the Portsmouth dockyard, was announced. Portsmouth's image may change further in the future, as it has over the past few years.

Throughout my career in local government, I sat on leisure or recreation committees, and I met many Ministers. I am sure that the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), came to Portsmouth. I seem to remember him swinging from the end of a rope at one stage, because physically he was able to participate more than most. The highlight of my career as chairman of a leisure committee was when we rearranged the tour de France leg for Great Britain and the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) and I were in Trafalgar square trying to straddle a bicycle. It was hilarious, given the size of us both. It was funnier than one can imagine.

On 12 July, we start a week of sports for the Special Olympics UK. The special Olympics are not the Paralympics or the transplant games; they are the Olympic games for people with learning difficulties—technically, people with a mental disability. They are held every year, and the national games take place every five years.

This year Portsmouth is hosting the games, with the assistance of the Special Olympics UK organisation, and they will encompass 2,100 athletes and another 4,500 carers, with voluntary assistants, officials, referees and all the other people who are needed.

The special Olympics will be a huge event lasting a whole week. The difficulties involved in transporting all those people from their hotels to the events—not only to participate in them but to socialise—and back again, are enormous. We know what happened in Atlanta, where all the huge power of the United States of America could not cope with the transport problems. But we are sure—at least we hope—that Portsmouth will be able to manage.

There is a first-class team in Portsmouth, run by the city council with SOUK. It is doing a fantastic job, with people working late, sometimes until midnight, to get the games off the ground. I hope that as many people as possible will be able to be part of the audience.

I thank the Minister for sport, who despite his heavy schedule has agreed to come and open the games. That is very special, and I know that he has put himself out to some extent to be there, because he feels so passionately about those games. On behalf of the city council and everybody who cares for the athletes, I thank him very much.

The athletes participate in the games in a way that is so emotional that one cannot believe it until one sees it. They feel the need to win, but if they cannot win, they want to be seen to be brave in the attempt. The feeling of camaraderie and help comes across so well, and when people win, they win for the whole team. It is magnificent.

The games are run in the style of the Olympic games. The rules are the same, with no unfairness and no favours. I hope that the event will be a magnificent success. There are always problems with funding, and I hope that the Minister for sport, my hon. Friend—no, I mean my right hon. Friend—the Member for West Ham—

Mr. Banks: Only honourable.

Mr. Rapson: He is right honourable to me.

Mr. Banks: That is all that matters.

Mr. Rapson: I hope that there is some sympathy there which can be squeezed for more cash—but that is only a hope; I am not putting any pressure on.

To end my short maiden speech, I can say that I now realise that I want to be a Member of Parliament. I only ever wanted to represent the people of Portsmouth in Parliament, but now I am here, I want to be a proper Member of Parliament. My maiden speech is the first step, and I am glad that I have made it.

1.27 pm

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth, North (Mr. Rapson) and for Watford (Ms Ward), who have just made their maiden speeches. One of them has obviously had long experience in local government, while the other is rather younger than me. Indeed, she is one of the youngest Members of the House. Both my hon. Friends made excellent contributions, and I am sure that we shall hear from them again often.

As a Member representing part of the city of Liverpool, I could not speak in a debate about sport today without saying how much the city is looking forward to hearing what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has to say on Monday about the Hillsborough disaster. We all look forward to his statement with great interest and hope.

I commend the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), who has popped out of the Chamber briefly, for what she said about women's participation in sport. She gave us several statistics showing that women's sport at all levels and all ages is taken less seriously than men's. It is supported less well in terms of facilities, sponsorship and coverage in our national media, including television.

As a result, women participate less in sport. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister for sport to keep that fact in mind whenever he is considering how to make sport for all a reality. We cannot have sport for all when women's sport

[Maria Eagle]

is seen as second-class or a poor relation. I wish to congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden on bringing the statistics to the attention of the House.

I recently visited an excellent exhibition about the Ashes at Australia house in the Strand. I noticed that despite the fact that women also play test matches and have had their own Ashes series for a long time, there was only one mention of that at the very end of the exhibition. That is a start, and we must bear it in mind that women's sport is just as important as that of our male counterparts.

I wish to refer to something that many may not consider to be a sport, but which I wish to argue is. It is a game played by old and young, and boys and girls. It is open to those who are able-bodied and those with disabilities, and allows them to compete equally against each other. We recently realised that it can be played by machines against humans with some success. It can even be played as an individual sport or as a team game; in a friendly way or in deadly serious competition. At its best, it promotes concentration, self-esteem and self-confidence among those who play it. It is played by 4 million people in this country, 15,000 of whom play competitively. It is the sport of chess.

I have played chess from the age of eight, but I now play in a rather more laid-back way than I used to. I no longer compete, but I spent 10 to 12 years of my youth competing seriously. Britain does not list chess as a sport, although 26 European nations do. The result is that there is very little access to funding for chess. Last year, the amount of state support for chess and chess development was only £49,000. That is despite the fact that Britain is recognised as the best chess-playing nation in the world outside the nations of the former Soviet Union. We have a proud record as a chess-playing nation.

I ask the Minister to consider seriously taking up the work begun by Mr. Sproat, and promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), on chess being re-categorised as a sport. In many European countries that are not as succesful as Britain, much more state support is provided. Greece, for example, spends £337,000 a year, as opposed to our £49,000. It is a game that allows those with disabilities, the old and young, the fit and unfit to compete against each other equally. If that is not a definition of sport for all, I do not know what is, and I should like the Minister to consider re-categorising chess as a sport in this country.

1.32 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I congratulate the hon. Members who made such excellent maiden speeches this morning. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for curtailing the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt), who was in danger of exceeding what I think is my record for the longest maiden speech in this Parliament. Thank you for your indulgence towards me on that occasion a few days ago.

I congratulate the new ministerial team on their appointments, and I particularly commend my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for giving us some good ideas in his opening remarks. I do not want to continue the impression that sport is dominated by soccer, but I must refer to the football club in my constituency.

Bury, North is fortunate enough to be the home of Bury football club, this year's second division champions and a team that has now achieved promotion in two successive seasons. I have invited the Minister for sport to venture north of Watford to attend an early fixture in the new season. He will be welcome at Gigg Lane as Bury takes on the giants of the first division.

Our club generates tremendous loyalty locally—it survives on modest means and has good community links. I hope that the new Front-Bench team will consider the role of small clubs in strengthening sport for all locally and in opening up opportunities. Our football club in Bury is a good example, but much more could be done.

Reference was made to the relationship between sport and the local economy. A lot more might be done to encourage football clubs to get interested in the possibilities of the windfall tax as a means of reducing youth unemployment. One of the most striking things about football in this country is that some of its most passionate adherents are the disillusioned, disaffected and alienated young men who are the victims of long-term unemployment. Their loyalty and support for their football clubs could be turned to good effect, if we can find ways to get them involved as employees of those clubs. The windfall tax opens up many interesting opportunities.

Smaller clubs face great problems as they go into the higher divisions. I was pleased to hear of the new money that will be available for ground improvements. I must draw attention to the problems that small clubs with small grounds face when they suddenly attract much larger crowds to their fixtures. Perhaps the new Front-Bench team could give that special consideration.

In any discussion about extending opportunities for sport, as we have heard from many contributors to the debate, the role of schools is crucial. In my constituency, some of the most attractive and extensive sporting facilities are in the possession of one school—a fee-paying school. It is a very good fee-paying school but, by definition, its resources are not available to the majority of my constituents. As fee-paying schools still receive considerable public subsidy—in spite of the phasing out of the assisted places scheme, there are the benefits of charitable status and exemption from value added tax—and some public money is going in, some public good should come out. As part of the post-assisted places scheme settlement between the state and the private sector in education, some consideration should be given to the way in which private schools' sporting facilities could be made more widely available.

Earlier, we discussed the damage that has been caused by selling off so many playing fields over the years. I welcomed the statement on 11 June by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on that subject. Another issue is the capacity of small schools, operating under a rigid local management of schools system, to make their facilities fully available to the community economically. That point needs to be flagged up. We need some liaison between the Departments of National Heritage and for Education and Employment to assist small schools to make their facilities more widely available.

On the role of teachers in encouraging sport and making sporting opportunities available outside school hours, if we are to restore the involvement of teachers

outside school hours, we need to offer some encouragement and support to teachers. If the chief inspector of schools continues to create the impression that most teachers are incompetent and should be sacked, it is not the most subtle way to encourage teachers to get involved in extra-curricular activities.

I make a special plea for the Department of National Heritage to consider ways of encouraging more older people to be involved in sport. The only reference to older people in the debate has been to getting rid of the old farts involved in rugby league and the older members of the various sports councils. We must reconsider the ways in which older people can be involved, actively as participants, in sport.

Mr. Fearn: To clarify, I was speaking about the elderly people on the sports councils, who are all keen sportspeople. I do not want to get rid of them. I want to introduce new people. I think that the hon. Gentleman's interpretation is wrong.

Mr. Chaytor: I take that point completely, but we should consider the opportunities that could be made available to older people. One of the striking things about people in their 70s and 80s is the enormous discrepancy in their levels of activity and mental agility. There is no question but that physical activity is related to longevity and good health. I make a special plea for more encouragement for older people.

In my constituency, the most rapidly growing sport is line dancing among the over-65s—perhaps that is the first reference to line dancing in the House. Perhaps we should redefine the nature of sport, when aerobics is considered a sport and line dancing is not. Perhaps the new ministerial team could consider encouraging sports such as bowls and cycling for older people.

One of the most staggering statistics to emerge in the debate was that relating to participation in sport by adults from professional and low-skill backgrounds. The enormous discrepancy between middle-class and working-class participation cannot be ignored.

The issue is related to the economy and the nature of the labour market, because it is indisputable that, if people's lives are dominated by the struggle to eke out a living, by the move from one short-term, part-time, temporary, low-paid job to another, they will not have the energy, inclination and motivation or the money to enjoy fully the benefits of participation in sport.

We need to reconsider the concept of the flexible labour market, because as long as we have an enormous pool of low-paid, part-time workers, they will be excluded from the opportunities that sport can bring, and our policy of sport for all will be deficient.

If there is an apparent paradox between our concern to provide sport for all and the concern of some of us to ban certain sports, the point must be made that a crucial element in sport is that all the participants have an equal chance of survival, if not of success. Hunting with hounds does not give an equal chance of success or survival to all the participants.

1.41 pm

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): I welcome what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said about allowing as many people as possible to participate in sport. I have participated in sport for more than 40 years, and I have had great pleasure from it, although, unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick), I am now too old, clapped out and slow for even the House of Commons football team.

I welcome what my right hon. Friend said about rights of access to open country, about the academy, about widening access and about involving people from ethnic minority communities. It is true that a lot has been done in the past few years, especially in football, to get rid of some of the racism. The campaign that was run by the Commission for Racial Equality, the Professional Footballers Association and many clubs has had some positive effects.

That is true of smaller clubs, as well as the big ones. My local club, Leyton Orient, was very much involved in the campaign, and produced a play with a local theatre group that went nationally to schools to explain to children from 12 to 15 what was going on and what they could do to stand up against it.

I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) said about the contribution of smaller clubs. I noted that he did not mention Swinton rugby league club, which shares the Bury ground. If he is going to Bury, perhaps he should watch Swinton as well. Rugby league has spread south of Watford, and civilisation has been brought here with the Broncos playing professionally in London.

Before leaving small clubs and the involvement of ethnic minority groups, I must add that we should not be complacent. There are still no, or very few, Asian professional footballers. Asian leagues play to quite a high standard, but there are definite barriers of access.

There has been some pleading of special cases in the debate, so I will not be shy about joining in. Anyone asked what is the most popular spectator sport would answer correctly that it is football, but how many people, in the House or outside, know immediately that the second most popular spectator sport is greyhound racing? As Walthamstow is the country's premier dog track, it would be expected that I should take an interest. Greyhound racing is not a minority occupation. Last year, it involved 4 million people, including 50,000 dog owners and 10,000 employees, some of whom are very skilled: trainers, kennel hands, groundsmen and the like.

Greyhound racing has had an image of seediness, but tracks such as Walthamstow and Wimbledon show that it is not so seedy any more. There has been an unfortunate association with sports such as coursing. Most people who support greyhound racing want nothing to do with such activities. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North mentioned so-called country sports. The way that the Opposition spokesman talked about the popularity of sports that involve killing things made me think that he was about to remind us that it was not so long ago that public hangings were a popular spectator sport and suggest that we bring them back. Dog racing has had an unjustified seedy image. It works closely now with animal welfare organisations.

However, greyhound racing faces problems, some of which result from the anomalous way in which it is treated. I was interested that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) mentioned the recognition of chess as a sport, because greyhound racing is recognised as one in some ways. People who go to watch it

[Mr. Neil Gerrard]

think that they are going to a sport. The press certainly thinks that it is a sport: it is covered in the sports pages. It is represented on the major spectator sports panel of the Central Council of Physical Recreation. It is subject to the Safety of Sports Grounds Act 1975. In all those ways, greyhound racing has recognition as a sport, but because it is not recognised as one by the Sports Council, there are problems. It gets no access to lottery funds. Although its tracks have to do exactly the same things as football and rugby grounds in respect of spectator safety, the sport gets no help. I know that this is not directly a Department of National Heritage problem, but it is an anomaly. I hope that Ministers will discuss it with their colleagues in other Departments.

I guess that, because of the gambling associated with greyhound racing, it has always been regarded as a Home Office responsibility. It is far from the only sport that involves gambling. If the national lottery is not gambling, I do not know what it is. That is directly a National Heritage Department matter. There are also anomalies in the way in which the sport gets its income. There is a compulsory levy on bookmakers to pay money to horse racing, but in greyhound racing it is voluntary. One can guess the result: out of 2,000 bookmakers, 200 pay the levy, while the rest pocket it. That is neutral to the Treasury, but because the levy is voluntary, the sport does not get the money.

I wish my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Minister for sport well in their new posts. I hope that they will look at sport in the widest sense, a point that was made by many hon. Members who raised different issues and activities. I hope that we will think about sport for all in the broadest sense of getting as many people as possible to participate, and to watch sport at all levels and in all sorts of different ways.

1.48 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): I add my congratulations to the Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage, the hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), on his appointment as Minister for sport. I am not sure whether he remembers, but this is not the first occasion on which he and I have met across the Dispatch Boxes. I well remember some of our most enjoyable exchanges when the Dock Work Bill was being considered in Standing Committee. In one extraordinary debate, he seemed to think that I and some of my hon. Friends were responsible for a collective attack on an Anglican bishop and other related activities. He also gave us an insight into why he thought that it would be good to be a Minister. I have not been able to trace one of his most enjoyable remarks, but if he and I can extend our careers long enough, I should be able to bring it to the House on a subsequent occasion. It was about his desire to drive around in a ministerial Montego.

Although I have not been able to find that reference, on another occasion the hon. Gentleman said:

"I have never served on a Committee with the Secretary of State."—

my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler)—

"so I am looking forward to this one, so that I can study in closer detail the way in which he works and pick up a few tips that will be useful one day when I am a Secretary of State. I suspect that that will not be for a considerable time, not because I do not believe that we shall have a Labour Government after the next election"—

this was in 1989—

"but because I do not believe that my case for preferment will be pushed to its logical conclusion."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 27 April 1989; c. 119.]

I for one am delighted that, if it has not yet been pushed to its logical conclusion, it is well under way.

The debate has been remarkable for the lack of rancour and the degree of consensus that has been achieved—that will possibly still be so even at the end of my remarks—and for the quality of the speeches. No fewer than 16 speeches have been made from the Back Benches, of which no fewer than five were maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Fearn) cannot be described as only slightly maiden, so he comes as a retread. I shall say a word about that in a moment. We really have been fortunate today in the quality of the maiden speeches.

The first maiden speech was by the hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick). He told us that, for him, sport for all was about involving the whole community, not simply the elite. He spoke passionately and eloquently about the concept of fairness for all. He referred to some of his illustrious predecessors, some of whom we have known in the House. It was a speech of great passion and eloquence and both he and his constituents can be pleased with that speech. I certainly look forward, as I am sure other hon. Members do, to hearing further speeches from him. He was especially generous—this applied to all the maiden speakers—to his Tory predecessor. Still smarting somewhat from the last election, we take well and gratefully receive those remarks.

The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) told us about his long involvement with sport. I, too, was unable to bring my maiden speech to the crisp conclusion that I had in mind, such are the disciplines of the House, but his was a remarkable performance, in which he can take great pride. I know how he feels about the inventing of ideas. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) will remember that he invented the policy of selling off council houses, but ultimately it is those who put these things into operation who claim the credit.

For a lawyer, the hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward) made a particularly good speech. I can get away with remarks like that because I, too, am a lawyer. She spoke with commendable brevity and great wit. She said that Tristan Garel-Jones had gone back to Spain. I have to say that some of us suspected that he had never left it. She was generous in her remarks about him. She reminded us properly of the devastation that drugs can cause to young lives and the role that sport can play in rescuing young people from that fate. I am sure that we shall be hearing other speeches from her.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, North (Mr. Rapson) seemed to regret that, on this occasion, he was not able to get stuck into the Opposition. Well, we are all here and there will be other occasions when the hon. Gentleman will be able to do so. I welcome the generosity of his remarks about Peter Griffiths, who was particularly interested in the role of disabled people in sport. That is a matter to which I shall return in the substance of my remarks.

I also enjoyed the speech of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle). My task has been made slightly easier by the fact that her sister is now on the

Front Bench, so I know that the hon. Lady must be the other twin. I have no doubt that, in due course, I shall be faced with the confusion of having both hon. Ladies on the Front Bench and then, obviously, my task will be made slightly harder.

The hon. Lady made a fair point about chess as a sport. That responsibility will not fall to me, but I can see the problems in deciding whether it could be a sport. To an extent, time is with her, however, because if I recall the position—I stand to be corrected if I am wrong—the International Olympic Committee has now designated chess as a sport of the mind. The same could be said of bridge. If my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) had been able to be with us, he, too, would have expressed that hope about bridge. Obviously, one wonders about the degree of athleticism in chess other than running to give a press conference if one succeeds. It was well worth hearing the hon. Lady raise that worthwhile point.

The concept of sport for all is an interesting one, which has been around for some little while. It first emerged in a Council of Europe declaration in 1966. At that time, the English Sports Council felt that it had played a significant part in the adoption of that slogan. Because politicians especially use language in the way in which they want to use it, the meaning of that slogan has changed over the years. There was a time when that concept of sport for all was so wide and all-embracing that it almost became a health slogan. The idea of elitism in sport and ensuring that those with a soaring talent can soar disappeared to an extent. The fashion has now changed, and changed for the better.

Sport for all is now about excellence at all levels. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey said that all of us have a gold medal standard within us. In some of us it is lower than in others, but the hon. Gentleman properly summed up that one's personal excellence is a goal worth achieving. If the concept of sport for all means excellence at the highest levels, participation and access for women, the disabled and ethnic minorities, that is the right way in which to use that slogan.

On a subject like sport, we can be relatively uncontroversial. Members of the public who look at our debates and who tolerate us tearing the guts out of each other on most occasions do not expect such rampant controversy in a debate on sport. Let me pick up on something that the Secretary of State said. Although I accept that sport for all is a wide concept, I do not believe that it can encompass trespass for all. There is a debate to be had in the House about the right to roam and access to the countryside. That is a debate for another day because there are some tough issues to talk about.

The issue of hunting also raised its profile slightly in today's debate. The last thing I want to do on my first outing at the Dispatch Box is to fall out totally with the Minister for sport. To be fair to him, I know that he is keen on foxes, but I do not know quite what he has against fish. The hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) argued that at least in sport the quarry should have a chance of survival. That is a fair point, but if I could be presumptuous enough to speak for fish, I doubt that they would see it that way. There is a debate to be had about that on another occasion and I am not sure that one on sport for all could include it.

If it is possible to achieve a reasonable consensus in the House about sport, it is necessary to say that development is something of a continuum. The Government will inevitably face the same problems as those that confronted the previous Government. They will never have enough money to do everything that they will reasonably want to do. Let us look at the figures for the mainstream funding for sport from the Department of National Heritage. It is projected to fall from £55 million, as at 1993-94, to £45 million in 1998-99. That is a 22 per cent. cut. If that were the end of the story, it would be an appalling one, and, far from being uncontroversial, people would be lynched about it.

However, there is rather more to say than that and we should look at some of the achievements of the not too distant past. For example, there is the work of the Foundation for Sport and the Arts, which was established in August 1991 as a result of a reduction in the pools levy duty in 1990. In all, around £245 million or £250 million has been contributed toward up to 17,000 sports-related projects. Scarcely a week goes by in my constituency or in the west country without my hearing of an individual enterprise that has been funded in that way.

We heard today that in excess of half a billion pounds has been contributed via the national lottery to sporting endeavour. The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) said that she thought Camelot was absolutely super, which is not a positive career development move, but makes the point that Camelot has done a pretty good job. There is no doubt that the national lottery makes it possible for massive sums of money to go to sport.

Kate Hoey: I want to make clear exactly what I said. I said that Camelot was doing a very good job with the powers that had been given by Parliament.

Mr. Nicholls: I accept entirely that the hon. Lady said that.

When one looks at the structures and opportunities for funding that were introduced by the last Government, at the contribution made by the publication "Raising the Game" and at the vast range of initiatives that would have culminated in the establishment of a British academy of sport, one can see that the last Government—especially the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major)—had a commitment to sport and therefore the ability to push the sporting agenda forward that is so far unique. I want to hear more from the Minister for sport about the present position on the British academy of sport. When it is established, it will be the most significant contribution to sporting excellence that the country has ever seen.

The marvellous thing about the academy is that it will be building on sure foundations. We have only to look at recent achievements to see that: British athletes winning the European cup for the first time since 1989; the success of our cricket team in the first Cornhill test; and the victory of our football team in the Tournoi de France. With a bit of luck, we might today see the success of Tim Henman and Greg Rusedski at Wimbledon. All that shows that our ability to perform well in sporting contests is not a series of isolated incidents, but real achievements on which it will be possible to build.

Several hon. Members also made the point that, if that effort is to succeed, it will have to start in schools, whether we are talking about the champions of the future

[Mr. Nicholls]

or those who will find that, in their own modest way, recreational sport plays a part in their lives. I do not want to get too involved in the point that, once upon a time, competitive sport was frowned on in some quarters. Blessed is the sinner that repenteth—no one has stood in the House today and said that competitive sport should disappear. I accept that the agenda has now moved on.

When considering the opportunities for promoting sport in schools, we can point to many things that mark a significant way forward. For example, Ofsted has identified best practice in the teaching of physical education and sport in schools. Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools now reports annually to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment about the state of sport and physical education in schools. For the academic year 1996-97, schools must record in their governors' annual report that they meet the sporting aims and achievements. All that, and much more, shows that there is a recognition and an acceptance of the fact that schools have an absolutely vital role to play.

Given his encyclopaedic knowledge of those matters, there was no way that I would have risked crossing swords with the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) during his speech. He referred to the fact that it would be a good idea if the skills of retired sportsmen and women could be used in schools, where they could make a valuable contribution. That is probably a different way of stating the concept of sporting ambassadors. As I recall, the sporting ambassadors scheme was set up under the chairmanship of Sir Colin Cowdrey and I assume that, unless I have missed it, in the not too distant future there will be a development of that. The concept is good and to some extent it is on the stocks.

More could be done regarding schools. The Central Council of Physical Recreation has called for a minimum of two hours' physical education to be incorporated into the national curriculum and has made other suggestions. It says that the Government should

"consider ways of recompensing teachers for the time they spend on extra-curricular activities such as new resources for those activities; time-off in lieu to fulfil their commitments; including time spent on extra-curricular sport in teachers' professional development records; financial allowances; guaranteed out-of-pocket expenses"

and—an issue which the hon. Member for Vauxhall reminded us of—exempting volunteers from payment for criminal checks which have to be carried out.

It would be unreasonable—and therefore unlike me—to say, "The Government have been in post for the past six weeks; what have they done?" However, initiatives are up and running that have resonance on both sides of the House, and it should be possible to further them constructively.

Another benefit that has resulted from the initiatives that are already under way and the publication of "Raising the Game" is an increasing awareness that some sports that may have been regarded as elitist need not be seen in that light. Tennis has long been regarded as a middle-class sport, yet it is not. The record of, for example, some American tennis players at Wimbledon shows that there is a great deal more to tennis.

I welcome the fact that the Lawn Tennis Association is undertaking to ensure that at least a million children receive tennis coaching over five years, with an additional 100,000 hours of high-quality teaching a year by 2000—all on local authority courts. We are starting to see the possibility that a sport that has been regarded as a middle-class sport will assume a far greater resonance than that.

The subject of disabled people in sport was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) and then mentioned by several other hon. Members. I come to my new brief relatively fresh, but I stand in awe of the achievements of some of our disabled sportsmen. Simon Jackson and Noel Thatcher were recently given MBEs for their remarkable accomplishments. Small wonder, therefore, that when a former Member for Bury, North, Alistair Burt, came back from the Paralympics as Minister for the Disabled, he said:

"It is not the disabilities that make them special: it is that they are damned good at"

the sports they do. In many ways, that statement sums things up.

It should be possible to bring disabled people far more into mainstream sports. I can foresee difficulties that would be apparent to Members on both sides of the House, but I bear it in mind that it has been said that at least the Olympics should contain two particular wheelchair events—the 800 m for women and the 1500 m for men. That may sound unusual, but the force of the argument is clear, and there are ways in which we can bring that to pass. The skill involved in propelling a wheelchair is the same quality of skill as that involved in riding a race cycle or in rowing a boat. Considerable skill and effort are required to perform in the latter two disciplines. I doubt that anyone would be capable of pushing a wheelchair faster than Chris Hallam or John Harris.

Other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), spoke about the need to ensure that young women, too, have far greater access to sport. As the father of two extremely sporty daughters, I understand that to the hilt. However, role models are important, which is why it is so important that the process starts early: if it does not start in school, no role models are available. Those who are interested in equestrian sports can look to people such as Mary Thompson and Clarissa Bleekman, who are of the highest calibre, but perhaps there are not enough such role models. That will strike a resonance with anyone who is married to a sportswoman or who has children. We should hear much more about that aspect.

Whatever the political disagreements we may have from time to time, the Minister and I are, in our different ways, responsible for an uncontroversial brief. I uncontroversially offer him an idea. There may come a time when he would like to see some real football being played, and someone may invite him to Old Trafford. If he is invited up there, I would be more than happy to go with him. I could try to convince him of the good reasons for going north of Watford on the way up the motorway in his ministerial Montego.

2.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage (Mr. Tony Banks): I congratulate hon. Members who have participated in the debate. I have only 20 minutes, which is a long time for a speech, but it is not

long in which to reply to 16 speeches from Back-Bench Members and Opposition spokesmen. Hon. Members will have seen me taking copious notes on each speech and I assure them that, even if I cannot respond now, they will receive full replies to all their points.

As has been said, this has been a great summer of British sporting achievement—so far, I hasten to add. I am certainly not attempting to take any credit for that. First, it is not justified, because I have not done any of it. Secondly, sporting events are often likely to go pear-shaped, and when that happens I do not want people knocking on my door blaming me for what has gone wrong.

It is true that there is a feel-good factor in sport at the moment, as Linford Christie said after that wonderful achievement in the European championships. That gets straight through to our sportsmen and sportswomen, and it comes back to us, because we take pride in their achievements, whether they are able-bodied or have other abilities. The feel-good factor that politicians are looking for is more likely to come from what we see on the sporting field than from the movement of interest rates. If we are to take pride in the achievements of our sportsmen and sportswomen, we must do far more to contribute to their effort. We must provide resources and ensure that, when they win medals for Britain, we can say that Britain has done something to help them win.

I welcome the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) to his position. It is true that there is much all-party agreement in this area. That makes it rather interesting, because it means that we can cut through much of the yah-boo stuff and get down to the nitty gritty, but it is wrong to say that this area is not controversial: it is fraught with controversy. More people get involved in arguments and fights in pubs and other places about sporting issues than they do about anything else, so there is plenty of controversy, but there is common purpose in the House to ensure that we get the issues right, one of which is sport for all. When I speak as Minister for sport, I am speaking not only on the Government's behalf, but on behalf of the Opposition parties. If we stand together, we shall achieve far more.

My role is to serve as the long-stop, for those who are cricketers, or as the sweeper, for those interested in soccer. I see myself as perhaps the Ruud Gullit of the Government team although, as hon. Members will probably notice, I am considerably shorter, I am not black and I do not have dreadlocks.

I am in an interesting position because, in many ways, this is my first speech as a Minister. What am I saying: of course it is my first speech as a Minister, and I am as nervous as many of my colleagues who made their excellent maiden speeches today.

I have attended many debates on sport—debates that have often consisted mainly of a long speech from the Minister of the day saying how fantastic everything was. This country has much to be proud of in terms of sporting achievements, but there is so much more that we can and, indeed, must do to realise our full potential.

Only yesterday I was at a meeting of the UK Sports Council listening to complaints from elite athletes about the failure of the structures to deliver the service necessary for our achieving athletes. That message has run through many of today's speeches—structures are important in service delivery.

The shadow Secretary of State—the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude)—made his speech and has now fled the country. That is a shame because I want to put on record the fact that he paid an incredibly moving tribute at the funeral of Matthew Harding, the vice-chairman of Chelsea football club, because they had been friends since their school days.

The shadow Secretary of State mentioned among other things the issue of the British academy of sport, which was also mentioned by the hon. Member for Teignbridge, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), the hon. Members for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) and for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) and my hon. Friends the Members for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) and for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt). He asked my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State whether there would be an open decision, and that assurance was given. I was surprised that the right hon. Gentleman was so reluctant to accept that assurance.

No one is trying to delay the decision, but it is a difficult one and we have to get it right. We cannot take the wrong decision and repent at leisure. My criticism of the previous Government is that they got it back to front. They should not have simply said that they needed a national academy of sport; they should have set out their vision of what the academy should do and then asked bidders to come forward with plans along those lines. What they did was to say that they wanted a British academy and asked what it should be. As a result, the 26 applications were very disparate.

We are down to three options, but the Department has not decided to reopen the matter because we would only lose momentum and have to start all over again. We have accepted the shortlist of three—Upper Heyford, Sheffield and the central consortium based around Loughborough, Nottingham and Lilleshall. I hope that we shall have a decision in August or September at the latest.

The academy must be for elite athletes. It has to be able to provide them with absolute access to sporting facilities; nor is to be a spectator unit. It has to provide the finest sports medicine and science available. There has to be, if not a centralised, certainly the largest collection of sports we can get together because of the interaction that that brings and the cross-fertilisation of ideas.

Personally, I feel that the academy should concentrate primarily on Olympic and Paralympic events and on the minority sports with world championships. I hope that that deals with how we do something about the sports events not covered extensively on television but in which we can achieve much at the national and international level.

The decision is not being delayed. It is a tough decision and, whichever way we jump, we shall upset more people than we satisfy. That is certainly true in terms of the location, but I think that our decision will be satisfactory to the premier athletes and to sport in general. We should not be accused of concentrating only on the elite. We might do so specifically in this case, but the academy will represent the pinnacle of the pyramid. It will be the apex and we want to extend the base as far as possible because, unless the base is broad, the pinnacle will be very limited.

The finest athletes—the exceptions—will always make it through, even if no facilities are provided, but think of all the talent that is wasted in this country because people are not given opportunities in schools or communities. Think of all the extra Linford Christies, Tessa Sandersons

[Mr. Tony Banks]

and Steve Crams we could get through to the highest level. That is why it is such a crime for our resources to be so wasted, particularly in our inner-city areas.

The right hon. Member for Horsham and others mentioned my support for angling. The Labour party has produced an anglers charter. I am a former piscatorial participant.

Mr. Hinchliffe: Say it again.

Mr. Banks: A piscatorial participant. I do not wish to sound immodest, but I was known in my day as a piscatorial artist—one of the finest. I shall shortly meet representatives of coarse, game and sea fishing. I do not put fishing in the same category as hunting with hounds for a variety of obvious reasons. Anyone who tries to lump them together is deluding themselves and attempting to delude the country. They will not be allowed to do that. The Government support angling. On another occasion, when there is more time, I shall expand on my views on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) made some kind comments about the Football Trust. He suggested that the Wimbledon tennis courts should be covered. Some of the national newspapers have suggested that that might be a good use for the millennium dome. That is not a matter for me to comment on.

My hon. Friend talked about how the price of season tickets might restrict the building of the football crowds of the future. That is a good point, which the football task force will investigate. We shall make an announcement about the composition of the task force shortly. He also mentioned the use of ex-professional footballers to coach football in schools. That is an excellent idea. I was coached by Jimmy Hill when I was at school, which is probably why I can talk a better game than I can play these days. I am seeing Howard Wilkinson on Monday about his proposals for the restructuring of youth coaching. I shall be able to raise some of the points that have been made during the debate.

The hon. Member for Surrey Heath talked about sport for the disabled, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, North (Mr. Rapson). They made some excellent points. I am taking a particular interest in disabled sports events. Since I have been a Minister, I have been to see disabled rugby and opened the world blind sailing championships. I should point out to the hon. Member for Teignbridge that that sport is trying to achieve more integration so that those with disabilities can compete on equal terms in the mainstream sport.

I have also been to the British retinitis pigmentosa awards and the London Community Cricket Association coaching session for disabled people. I opened the British disabled water skiing facilities at Heron lake. Seeing someone on one leg going over a water skiing jump is pretty formidable. It is not the sort of thing that I would do even if I had as many legs as a centipede.

I have been to the fundraising event for the special Olympics organised by Sainsbury's. My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, North will be pleased to know that I shall be going to open the special Olympics in Portsmouth. I am very sympathetic to the case that he and others have made for additional resources to fund the special Olympics next month. I think that I can be helpful and hopeful in saying that the English Sports Council, with which I discussed the issue yesterday, will be able to do something. We shall examine the issue carefully.

I take great pride in the achievements of our Paralympians. When I hear people say that we did not do particularly well at the Atlanta Olympics, I ask which Atlanta Olympics they are talking about. At the Paralympics, in which 60 other countries were involved, Great Britain came fourth in the world medals table. We won 39 gold medals, 42 silver medals and 41 bronze medals—a total of 122. Where was the coverage? It really annoys me that these days I can get coverage for breaking wind as I walk down the road, but I cannot get coverage for the excellent international achievements of our sportsmen and women. I direct that criticism specifically at the media. We need more coverage of those excellent achievements. It is not patronising; our athletes with other abilities are achieving at the highest possible level.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall, who has a distinguished sporting background, asked for decisions. I have already mentioned the British academy of sport, the future of the Sports Council, the structure of the national sports councils in consultation with other countries, sport for all and the national stadium. They are all important matters, many of which we have inherited from the previous Administration. I pay tribute to the efforts of the former Prime Minister, Iain Sproat and others. That brings me back to my original point that sport does not divide the House; I hope that it will continue to unite us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall asked about Crystal palace. As yet, no decision has been taken. She knows my personal affiliation to Crystal palace, given that the Greater London council used to run it. We shall be taking that decision as soon as possible.

On the matter of the World cup 2006, I hope that everyone will wear the badge that I am wearing. I am chairing the strategy committee. We are serious about Britain hosting the World cup 2006. We shall not do it by unfair methods, but on the basis of the facilities that we can offer the world. I know that we shall have the support of the Opposition on that.

The hon. Member for Meriden, in an excellent speech, mentioned something else about which I feel strongly—the role of women in sport. It is a shame that I do not have time to develop that theme as so many good points have been made. The hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey mentioned Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic games. Discrimination against women in sport starts with something that he said. He defined the modern Olympic games as

"the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism with internationalism as a base, loyalty as a means, art for its setting and female applause as reward".

In modern parlance, he would be described as a complete turnip. The Olympic charter still contains the following statement:

"No discrimination in the Olympic Games is allowed against any country or person on the grounds of race, religion or politics".

The omission of the word "gender" implies that sex discrimination is still permitted, and indeed it occurs within the Olympic games. That is something we have to address.

I now move on to my hon. Friends who made maiden speeches. I have known my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town, who is a West Ham supporter and a Fire Brigades Union member of some distinction, for many years. I ask him not to claim that Keir Hardie was one

of his predecessors. Indeed, most of the constituency of the illustrious founder of our party is in my constituency. My hon. Friend represents only a little bit of the south part of it. If anybody is claiming to be Keir Hardie's vicar on earth, it will be me and not my hon. Friend. However, he made some good points about the east end of London.

I greatly appreciated the original speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey. He also has international prowess as a rugby player and I should like him to play an active part in the formulation of Government policy. He is noted in the book and will be called upon to give us the benefit of his expertise. I share his dislike of bureaucracy because I want to be spared the hordes of old buffers in blazers and caps who purport to run so many of our sports.

I should inform my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) that I do venture north of Watford. In fact, my family comes from north of Watford. However, I do not know a great deal about rugby league and I am looking to him to help me up the steep learning curve that I am on at the moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Ms Ward) said in her maiden speech that she was reminded by her older constituents of Raphael Tuck, a guy I knew extremely well. Almost all her constituents are older than her, so that comes as no surprise. However, she spoke with an assurance that was almost intimidating. She said that I stood as a candidate for Watford in 1979. I know for a fact that she did not vote for me on that occasion because, unfortunately, she was only seven years old. That sort of stuff is fairly scary. I am glad to see that Elton John and Graham Taylor are reunited at Watford. I should be honoured to accompany my hon. Friend to Vicarage Road because they were there in 1979. I hope that those two together bring her more luck than they did me.

I am sympathetic to the idea put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) about including chess as a sport. Why not? The definition of a sport is fascinating, but we must leave that debate for another day.

It being half-past Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

MEMBERS' EXPENSES (INNER LONDON CONSTITUENCIES)

Resolved,

That, with effect from 2nd May 1997, the following shall be substituted for the Schedule to the Resolution of 20th December 1971 about parliamentary expenses (substituted by the Resolution of 19th July 1983)—

SCHEDULE

Battersea; Bethnal Green and Bow; Camberwell and Peckham; Cities of London and Westminster; Dulwich and West Norwood; Eltham; Greenwich and Woolwich; Hackney North and Stoke Newington; Hackney South and Shoreditch; Hammersmith and Fulham; Hampstead and Highgate; Holborn and St. Pancras; Islington North; Islington South and Finsbury; Kensington and Chelsea; Lewisham, Deptford; Lewisham East; Lewisham West; North Southwark and Bermondsey; Poplar and Canning Town; Putney; Regent's Park and Kensington North; Streatham; Tooting; Vauxhall.—*[Janet Anderson.]*

MODERNISATION OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ordered,

That Mr. Alastair Goodlad be discharged from the Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons and Mrs. Gillian Shephard be added to the Committee.—*[Janet Anderson.]*

NON-SITTING FRIDAYS

Ordered,

That the Order [19th May] relating to Non-sitting Fridays be amended by deleting Friday 4th July.—*[Janet Anderson.]*

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Monday 30th June, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Mr. Secretary Dewar relating to Scottish Grand Committee (Business and Sittings) not later than one and a half hours after their commencement; and the said Motion may be proceeded with, though opposed, after Ten o'clock.—*[Janet Anderson.]*

Further Education

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Janet Anderson.]*

2.31 pm

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): First, may I place on record my gratitude to the Minister for taking part in this debate? I imagine that taking part in an Adjournment debate on a Friday afternoon is not popular when one must travel back to the valleys afterwards. I also thank him for allowing my hon. Friends the Members for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) and for Romford (Mrs. Gordon) time to speak. I am also pleased that Madam Speaker saw fit to choose a debate on further education, which is a crucial issue that we face over the next five years in government.

The vital sector of further education is now marked by gross underfunding, anarchic organisation and an almost complete lack of strategic planning. Enormous powers are vested in principals who run further education colleges, rather than in local education authorities or boards of governors. Morale among staff is extremely low and there is an increasing and creeping casualisation of the work force through casual labour. Those factors have already led to a strike at Southwark college, which has been going on for some weeks.

About two weeks ago, I attended a meeting with further education staff from across Greater London in the House of Commons. During the course of the meeting it became clear that, if there were widespread disruptions and industrial stoppages at colleges across Greater London over the summer, it would come as little surprise. The combination of factors, especially underfunding and the failure to resolve the national dispute that has been going on for four years, is coming to a head, and Southwark may be the first college to enter an industrial dispute. The lecturers whom I met from Lambeth, South Thames, Barking, Hackney and many other colleges, particularly in central London, face the prospect of taking industrial action in the near future.

The root of the problems in further education goes back to 1993, the period of incorporation under the previous Government. Incorporation really meant taking colleges away from local education authorities and making them independent. At the same time, colleges were encouraged to increase the numbers of students enormously. The problem was that resources were not made available to cover that, so the previous Government introduced a "growth fund". That meant that in theory, every extra student was paid for directly by central Government. But because of the increasingly parlous state of the economy, the Conservative Government ran out of money, and in November 1996, in their last Budget, they did away with the growth fund. That plunged further education into an increasingly desperate financial struggle.

In addition, the Government introduced convergence—a policy that still exists, although I hope that it will soon be ended. It aims to bring each college's average level of funding—the ALF—within 10 per cent. of the national average.

That will hit London colleges especially hard, because in London there are high numbers of poor students, students on benefit, students who, for instance, do not have English as a first language, and various other problems that are rare outside London but common in London. So London colleges face increasing difficulties because of the convergence policy. Lambeth, for example, stands to lose £4 million, purely through convergence. That will mean cutting staff and increasing class sizes.

The general cuts, not just in Greater London but across the board and across the country, have led to reductions in staff at the vast majority of further education colleges. The more experienced staff are leaving further education, perhaps to take early retirement or because they are affected by various other developments. Basically, they are getting out of the sector and leaving it behind, because of stress, low pay, low morale and heavier and heavier work loads. There have been enormous efficiency savings in further education. That means cuts, and heavier work loads for the people who are left.

Meanwhile, the use of casual lecturers is becoming increasingly prevalent. Education Lecturing Services is the biggest company providing casual labour to colleges. Casual labourers are imported by colleges, which usually close courses and then invite Education Lecturing Services to provide casual teachers to take the same courses. The new casual teachers have much lower rates of pay, and do not have the same protection as full-time or permanent part-time staff. That leads to friction within the colleges.

An example is provided by Havering college of further education, the nearest college to my constituency of Hornchurch. I am sure that my two neighbouring hon. Friends, the hon. Members for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) and for Romford, will agree when I say that at Havering there is probably the potential for an industrial dispute.

The latest plan that the principal has decided to adopt is to close the hairdressing course. That will not set the world on fire, but a lecturing service called Central is to provide casual lecturers to run the course, and the big problem, the worry for local people and for lecturers at the college, is that the practice may spread to other courses.

My two hon. Friends and I questioned the principal about that. Like many principals, he wields enormous power without reference to anyone in the college. He said, and I believed him, that he did not want to extend the policy to other courses, but that he might have no choice. He did not mention any specific courses, but one thinks of engineering, building, history and many other courses in which it would be easy to make enormous cuts by introducing companies such as Education Lecturing Services. I hope that that course does not have to be followed.

Among full-time lecturers a national dispute has been going on since 1993, yet it has had no coverage to speak of in the press for the past three years. The lecturers' union, the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education, tried to strike in 1993, but was undone by the previous Government's anti-trade union legislation, especially that passed in 1993. It had to call off industrial action to try to stop the ending of the old agreement between lecturers and employers.

As soon as incorporation took place, the new independent colleges said that they intended to terminate the national agreement, the silver book agreement, and move to local agreements—something that has happened in many other sectors of the economy. They did that, and introduced lower rates of pay and much longer hours.

Throughout the country, some lecturers who are still on the silver book agreement have not had a pay increase for four years. Colleges are now starting to sack lecturers still

on the agreement. A quarter of all lecturers in further education are on the silver book agreement, and they are faced with either the sack or being left on the same level of pay from now on if they remain in the sector. One of my constituents who works at Barking college is faced with the sack, as are many other lecturers there.

Casualisation is convenient for principals who want to break union organisations and attack terms and conditions, which many do. Many wield massive and overweening powers, and can more or less do what they want in colleges without reference to anybody else. The boards of governors have become self-perpetuating oligarchies that rubber-stamp the decisions of the principals and pass them back. That has led to considerable abuse of power in many colleges.

A notable example is Stoke college, where the principal, Neil Preston, has just been dismissed for gross misconduct. Among other things, he paid for overseas trips for himself and the marketing director of the college, Helen Chandler, with money from the college. In December, they both went on permanent sick leave and were found running a pub in north Wales. There you have it. If we hand great powers and financial options to principals, such a situation can develop.

The FE sector is in real danger of starting to come apart at the seams. That is very dangerous for the present Government, who have rightly put education and welfare to work at the top of their agenda. Further education must play a powerful part in the process. If FE is unable to take on strategic planning or central organisation, so that it can be organised in the correct way to provide welfare to work and a proper pattern of education, we shall have major problems.

There has been an enormous drop in standards in the past few years because of the problems that I have outlined. Ten years ago, the average FE student would have 30 hours of teaching or class contact time every week. That figure has now dropped to only 15 hours a week. A year ago, the Further Education Funding Council commented on the increased use of casual lectures and said:

"This increased casualised work force reduces costs, but such changes in staffing are not always in the best interests of the students. Only rarely do these staff engage in curriculum development, student support and guidance activities, extracurricular activities and formal staff and in-service training."

The FEFC was concerned that that development went too far and would undermine standards. The evidence is that standards are already well on the way to being undermined.

There are solutions which are quite apparent and can be taken on by the Government. Many have been outlined by the lecturers' union, NATFHE. The union has been beaten back over the past few years by incorporation and the activities of anti-union principals, but it still plays a reasonably determined role in trying to protect its members' positions, rights and pay.

First, we need the return of some form of democratic accountability in colleges. The Labour party has proposed that two members of the local education authority should be appointed to the boards of governors of FE colleges. I do not think that that goes far enough, as we need far greater LEA control over colleges. I would put colleges back under the aegis of the LEAs, to get more strategic planning into further education.

There is a crucial need for more resources. NATFHE estimates that it will take £2 billion to return colleges to the standards operating in 1990. I do not think that the Treasury will cough up £2 billion, but that does not mean that we should not keep asking for extra money. Any extra resources would be very valuable within the sector.

More strategic local and regional planning is also needed. Prior to the election, the Labour party suggested education and training boards, which is a good idea, with representatives from the colleges, local education authorities, unions and employers. It was also suggested that representatives of the training and enterprise councils should sit on the boards. I do not go along with that suggestion. The TECs have a poor record. We should look more to FE colleges and other institutions to provide the training, rather than TECs, which have done extremely badly.

I also want some sort of national inquiry into further education, along the lines of the Dearing report, although I shall bear in mind the fact that my hon. Friend the Minister told me yesterday that Helena Kennedy QC is to report on further education next Wednesday. That is worth bearing in mind, and the FE sector will certainly be looking forward to that report providing some solutions to our problems.

I want part-time staff to be directly and properly employed by the colleges, rather than their being employed on a part-time, casual basis. Finally, a return to national collective bargaining would not only restore the rights of lecturers and their representatives in NATFHE and the other unions, but give a great boost to morale in the sector, particularly among the part-time lecturers who have been hit hard. If we follow such a programme, we shall start to return further education to the standards that our students deserve and the standards and planning that we shall need in the next five years if we are to complete the programme that the Labour party has outlined.

2.45 pm

Mrs. Eileen Gordon (Romford): I shall take a few minutes to draw the attention of the House to a constituency case that illustrates the problems described so eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer).

My constituent worked for some 27 years at Waltham Forest college in east London—he was a senior manager. He was devoted and loyal and made a valuable contribution to that college. In March 1997, he was dismissed. The dismissal letter said:

"I am writing to formally give you 3 months notice of the termination of your appointment."

It continued:

"You will not be required to attend the college or carry out your normal duties during the period of your notice."

That sounds bad enough, but what happened was that he was called into the office—as he thought, to discuss the European funding that he had secured for the college—only to be sacked on the spot for no apparent reason, told he had five minutes to clear his desk and escorted off the premises, along with a colleague who was given similar treatment. He was not even allowed to say goodbye to his staff and colleagues.

That is a disgraceful way to treat people. How humiliating for that professional and sensitive man. The college has admitted that it breached procedures and

[Mrs. Eileen Gordon]

contracts, yet it has done nothing to repair that damage. My constituent has not been reinstated or even been able to appeal. The college will communicate only through solicitors.

Something has gone seriously wrong with the governance not only of Waltham Forest college but of colleges throughout the country, where similar tyrannical actions have taken place. I simply cannot imagine that such autocratic and arrogant behaviour occurred when the colleges were administered by local authorities.

My constituent has been traumatised by the experience. His health and that of his family have suffered. He still cannot believe that this has really happened to him.

Further education colleges do a great job for our communities, but the staff are now demoralised and fearful of their future, not knowing who will be the next to be sacked. FE colleges should be at the heart of the Government's welfare-to-work programme, but before that happens the governance and structure of the colleges must be put in order.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to investigate the situation, not only at Waltham Forest, on which I will happily provide information, but in colleges throughout the country. If the fat cats in charge of these colleges will not or cannot put their house in order, the Government must do it for them.

2.48 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I welcome this debate, but I regret that it has taken place at this time of the week, with such a small attendance, because it is an issue of major importance. I hope that, after the publication of the Kennedy report next week, there will be another opportunity to discuss it with a wider group of Members.

Before I became a Member, I had the responsibility of managing the shambles of the internal market in further education in one of the United Kingdom's largest colleges, so I speak with some feeling on the subject. My hon. Friends the Members for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) and for Romford (Mrs. Gordon) have identified many of the key features affecting colleges.

There are two colleges in my constituency: Bury college, a large tertiary college, and Holy Cross college, a Catholic sixth form college. In the past three years, they have both received excellent inspection reports, met all the targets set by the Further Education Funding Council and kept their budgets in balance, but they face enormous difficulties in sustaining the quality of education.

Bury college faces a cut of £1 million to sustain the present level of provision. That is typical of colleges throughout Britain. Every college in Britain, other than very small or specialist colleges, is getting cuts in budgets—sometimes cuts of 10, 20 or even 31 per cent. That cannot continue.

It is important to refer to the internal market, because even if the market in further education is not as glamorous or as well known as that in the health service, its effects have been equally damaging. A nightmare of bureaucracy has been created, and more and more time is spent on processing information of dubious value and reliability and less and less time on teaching.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch referred to the importance of strategic planning. If the Government do not intervene in the funding of colleges, two things will happen. First, there will be a series of bankruptcies and closures within the next 12 months, as possibly more than half the British colleges are running a deficit. That cannot be sustainable, and many colleges will close if no action is taken. Secondly, college closures, as we have already seen in Greater Manchester, will have a devastating effect on students' careers, families and prospects.

It is crucial that we bring an element of strategic planning to the internal market in further education, to manage the crisis and ensure that, where rationalisation is necessary, it is effected in a planned and thoughtful way, for the benefit of staff, students and the community.

2.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Dr. Kim Howells): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) on choosing the subject of further education for what I believe is his first Adjournment debate. I welcome the short, but valuable, contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) and for Romford (Mrs. Gordon).

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch described in detail the problems that beset some colleges in the further education sector. He gave examples of apparent bad management, generating poor morale among lecturing staff, and referred to issues of accountability and, of course, funding. It is obvious that much of the blame for such features in what, overall, has been a remarkably resilient sector should be laid at the door of the previous Administration.

I do not want to dwell too much on past mistakes and attitudes. Instead, and before I address the specific points made by my hon. Friends, I believe that it would be helpful first to set out the new Government's philosophy—vision, if you like—for further education. I hope that my hon. Friends will remember that we have placed education at the centre of our agenda. It is critical to the future of our nation and to our economy. Within that agenda, further education has a tremendously important role to play in creating the learning society that we want to establish.

Further education is a route whereby effective learning, and therefore new opportunities, can be offered to more and more people. It has the capacity to increase economic potential and reduce the numbers of those who are socially excluded. The Government believe that colleges will play an increasingly vital role in creating a society based on partnership and shared community values rather than on narrow self-interest. For example, the contribution of post-16 providers including, crucially, further education colleges, will be vital to the effective delivery of the new deal. That is our vision.

I believe that that message has already been taken on board by colleges, governors, principals, teaching staff and students. I know from my recent meetings with those involved in further education, from my visits and from my postbag that the sector appreciates the new emphasis that the Government have placed on partnership and the fact that, so far as we are concerned, further education will no longer be the forgotten sector.

To turn to the important issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch, I noted his suggestion that colleges need to become more democratic and accountable to their local communities. The Government and I believe that. At present, colleges can co-opt on to their governing bodies only up to two members with local government connections. The Government support such co-options, but believe that they do not go far enough. Generally, such co-options are helpful in increasing the sense of partnership with the local community. In the coming months, we shall consider carefully whether we need to, and how we can, enhance the links between colleges and local authorities. The Further Education Funding Council is discussing precisely that subject with the Local Government Association.

The fundamental issue at stake is the incorporation of colleges and the consequent requirement on them to assume responsibility for their pay and conditions of service, which is embodied in the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. In effect, teaching, internal organisation and management, including pay and conditions of service contracts, have become the responsibility of the principal and the governing body set up to conduct a college. Moreover, as things stand, the Secretary of State's powers to intervene in local matters concerning further education institutions, such as contractual arrangements, are limited. He has certain statutory powers to intervene under section 496 of the Education Act 1996 when satisfied that the governing body is acting or proposing to act "unreasonably" in the strict sense in which that word has been interpreted by the courts, or under section 57 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 in the event of mismanagement or breach of duty by the governing body of an institution.

Although we cannot officially become involved in the detail of particular local disputes, the Government wish to encourage a spirit of partnership between employers and employees in further education, as elsewhere. That can only be for the good of colleges, staff and students. Managements who behave in the way described by my hon. Friend the Member for Romford had better understand that this Government will not put up with such arrogance or with high-handed, insensitive attitudes that do nothing to improve morale or to provide high-quality training and education for our young people.

In the few moments left, I wish to add a few words about further education funding. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch will not be surprised to hear that I have received many representations on the issue. We are addressing it, but I say frankly that it is not an easy task. A central feature of the methodology is that the FEFC guarantees colleges 90 per cent. of their previous year's funding in return for delivering 90 per cent. of their previous year's activity. That provides colleges with some stability year on year to enable sensible planning. The colleges can and do bid for more funding units at slightly more marginal rates if they are convinced that they can recruit and retain more students.

The FEFC has informed colleges of their allocations for the 1997-98 academic year. In finalising those allocations, the council has tried to ensure that the transition to funding arrangements that do not include the demand-led element has been as equitable as possible. I realise, however, that those allocations will require colleges to take difficult decisions to live within their budgets. We will consider urgently over the coming months the future funding of further education. During that time, we will listen carefully to the views of colleges, and of their representatives bodies, as well as to those of the funding council. In the meantime, we will consider the funding of the sector as the need arises. The definition of what is required will be subject to a great deal of public examination after the publication next Wednesday of the report by Helena Kennedy QC on further education.

The matter will be subject to even greater scrutiny after the publication in July of Sir Ron Dearing's inquiry into the future of higher education, certainly the most important report on higher education since the Robbins report of 30 years ago. It will be a critical time for discussion about further and higher education. I believe that it can play a crucial role—a much bigger one than it has done—in providing proper and robust training for our young people and to improve the competitiveness of this country. If we do not get that right, we will not be competitive, we will lose jobs and we will slip down the international leagues. We cannot afford to do that.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Three o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 16 June 1997

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

EU Development Council

Mr. Dennis Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the outcome of the European Union Development Council Meeting on 5 June. [4140]

Clare Short: Ministers held further discussions on the future of EC trade and development relations with the African, Caribbean and Pacific States. The Council adopted two Resolutions. The first establishes mechanisms to improve coherence between development and other EC policies. The second sets out plans to create a more coherent framework for research activities. The Council also adopted two sets of Conclusions, relating to co-ordination between the programmes of the Community and Member States and the needs of indigenous peoples. It also agreed a Common Position on a draft Regulation covering co-financing with Non-Governmental Organisations. Useful discussions were held on a number of other topics, including the 1996 DAC report on EC Development Assistance, preparations for the forthcoming United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) to review progress since the Rio Summit, and UN Reform. The Commission made presentations on two further topics: proposed Community involvement in the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative and Democratisation, Human Rights and the Rule of Law in the ACP states.

Environmental Policy

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to ensure opportunities for women to participate in environmental decision-making; and if she will make a statement. [3756]

Clare Short: I am making a speech on 26 June at the Commonwealth Institute which will outline our plans, for enhancing the participation of women in the decision-making process in all aspects of development.

Sustainable Development

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's proposals relating to women and sustainable development for the Earth summit II. [3758]

Clare Short: One of the messages the UK will be stressing at the Earth summit II is that environmental sustainability and the elimination of poverty go hand in hand. I firmly believe that empowering women is a major key to poverty reduction. My Department will be refocusing its efforts to support the aim of halving the proportion of people living in abject poverty by 2015.

Sexual Discrimination

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures her Department is taking to eliminate discrimination against women world-wide; and if she will make a statement. [3754]

Clare Short: My Department already has a gender equality strategy which was redesigned in response to the Beijing Platform for Action. We will continue to assess and address inequalities between women and men as an integral part of all our development co-operation activities.

Development Policy

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the funds allocated to promoting women's role in development for each of the next six years. [3757]

Clare Short: There is no pre-set allocation of funds for any sector within the development co-operation programme. My Department's policy is to mainstream gender equality throughout all its activities and to carefully monitor progress.

Human Rights

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the promotion and protection of the human rights of women and girls. [3753]

Clare Short: My Department recognises that the rights of women and girls need special attention if human rights are to be secured in practise. Women's development and the education of girls, as well as human rights, will be major themes of the forthcoming Development White Paper.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Closed Circuit TV

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to regulate the use of footage obtained from CCTV cameras. [3392]

Mr. Michael: Most public space closed circuit television systems are already regulated by codes of practice as are any systems which receive financial assistance from the Home Office. We wish to encourage best practice but will be prepared to consider the arguments on the principle and practicalities of statutory regulation of CCTV to underpin the existing codes of practice.

Treason and Piracy

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in what year was the last *(a)* prosecution and *(b)* conviction for (i) treason and (ii) piracy; and what was the penalty imposed. [3391]

Mr. Michael: Statistical data held centrally by the Home Office show one prosecution in 1981 for treason under the Treason Acts 1351 to 1842. This resulted in a conviction carrying a five-year custodial sentence. A

further four prosecutions have also been recorded (two in 1989, one in 1991 and one in 1992) but none resulted in a conviction.

In 1849 there were two prosecutions under the Piracy Act 1837. One resulted in a custodial sentence of between seven to 10 years. In 1894, five defendants were tried for piracy. All were acquitted.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to change the detention procedures relating to asylum seekers; and if he will make a statement. [3388]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: A general review of the Government's immigration detention policy is currently being undertaken.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans in respect of the white list. [3386]

Mr. O'Brien: We are reviewing the provisions of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996, including those relating to designated countries of destination, and will consider the options for change that best meet our manifesto commitment to secure swift and fair asylum decisions.

Firearms

Mr. Frank Cook: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements have been made to ensure that police stations at which firearms are surrendered in accordance with the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 comply with the health and safety requirements concerning the handling of explosive substances. [3594]

Mr. Michael: The Police Service is fully aware of its obligations under the Health and Safety at Work etc., Act 1974. Police stations are not required to be licensed to store explosives, but forces have a general duty of care to ensure the health, safety and welfare of staff. The terms of the compensation scheme keep the need to store explosives for any length of time down to a minimum and forces have been offered guidance on the safe handling of surrendered firearms, ammunition and explosives. The Explosives Inspectorate Directorate and the Ministry of Defence will offer further guidance to police forces as necessary.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will give authority under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968 to competitors from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the Commonwealth Games 2002 to use pistols in their ownership which are lawfully held overseas so that they can participate in the games on equal terms with nationals from other countries. [3994]

Mr. Michael: The Government appreciate the need for the planning of the games to take place well in advance and we intend to discuss the matter with all interested parties. It is too early to grant section 5 authority at this stage. However, all competitors from the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, will be eligible to be considered nearer the time.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, (1) pursuant to his oral statement of 11 June, *Official Report*, column 1165, if he will publish the evidence which shows that nothing proposed in the Firearms (Amendment) Bill will put the holding of the Commonwealth Games in Manchester in 2002 in jeopardy; [3990]

(2) pursuant to his statement of 11 June, *Official Report*, column 1165, if he will publish the evidence which shows that nothing proposed in the Firearms (Amendment) Bill will put in jeopardy the ability of the United Kingdom to host a future Olympic Games. [3989]

Mr. Michael: The arrangements for holding the Commonwealth Games in Manchester in 2002 are set out in a contract between Manchester city council and the Commonwealth Games Federation. The contract can be invalidated only if the host nation is unable to hold the games due to natural disaster or if the games are not properly organised.

The hosting of the Olympic Games and the inclusion or otherwise of particular events is a matter for the Olympic Committee to decide in discussion with prospective host nations. The provisions of section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968 can be used to allow shooting events to take place.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library the correspondence which he has had with the organisers of the Commonwealth Games in Manchester in 2002 in relation to pistol shooting competitions. [3992]

Mr. Michael: The Home Office has not received any correspondence from the organisers of the Commonwealth Games in Manchester in relation to pistol shooting competitions, but the issue was dealt with fully in the debate in the House on 11 June 1997.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library a draft of the authority and the conditions attached thereto which he intends to grant under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968 in respect of competitors in pistol shooting events at the Commonwealth Games in Manchester in 2002. [3988]

Mr. Michael: No. Any authority to be issued to competitors for the pistol shooting events at the Commonwealth Games in 2002 under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968 will be a matter for the Secretary of State. Under section 5(4) of the 1968 Act, the Secretary of State can attach any conditions which he considers necessary to ensure that public safety or the peace is not endangered. It is a matter for the Secretary of State to decide the appropriate drafting and conditions of any such authority after consultation with the Games organisers and, in the case of Manchester, with the Greater Manchester police.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy to outlaw the possession and use of black powder pistols. [3991]

Mr. Michael: The term "black powder pistol" is not used in the Firearms Acts, but is synonymous with a muzzle-loading gun as defined in the Firearms

(Amendment) Act 1997. The Government have no plans at present to prohibit the possession of such weapons. The Firearms (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill, which is presently before Parliament, deals only with the prohibition of small-calibre pistols. However, we shall keep under close review all controls on firearms to ensure maximum public safety.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many authorisations Home Secretaries have given under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968 during the last five years to foreign nationals to enable them to participate in pistol shooting competitions in the United Kingdom. [3993]

Mr. Michael: There have been no applications. Until the implementation of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997, pistols (other than fully automatic pistols) are not prohibited under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968 and authority is not required. Foreign nationals can at present possess pistols on a visitor's firearm permit issued by the police force for the area which they were visiting.

Prisoners (Suicides)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in each of the last five years, how many prisoners have committed suicide *(a)* at HMP Winchester and *(b)* in total; if he will list the dates of all suicides committed at HMP Winchester; and if he will make a statement. [1086]

Ms Joyce Quin: The number of self-inflicted deaths at Winchester prison and for the whole prison estate over the requested period is shown in the table. For Winchester, the individual coroners' verdicts were as follows:

1993: open

1994: suicide

1996: 1 x open; 1 x suicide

1997: inquests still outstanding.

The Prison Service is committed to doing everything possible to reduce the likelihood of suicides occurring and is continuing to research prevention strategies.

Self-inflicted deaths in prison establishments: 1992–1997[1]

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Totals for the prison estate	41	47	62	60	64	21
HMP Winchester	0	1	1	0	2	2
Dates of deaths at HMP Winchester		20 February	31 July		23 April 3 May	16 May 17 May

[1] 1997 total up to 21 May 1997.

Prison Service Union

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to give the Prison Service Union official recognition as a trade union. [3273]

Ms Joyce Quin: The Prison Service has no plans to give official recognition to the Prison Service Union at this time.

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the prisons at which members of the Prison Service Union work. [3272]

Ms Quin: The Prison Service does not formally recognise the Prison Service Union (PSU) and does not maintain membership records or details of the location of the union's members. However, it is understood that PSU membership is in the order of 1,200 in England and Wales, spread across more than 100 prison establishments.

Life Sentence Prisoners

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the number of *(a)* men and *(b)* women, who were serving a life prison sentence in prisons in England and Wales as of 1 June. [3203]

Ms Joyce Quin: The latest available provisional totals are for 30 April 1997. On that date, there were 3,523 male and 128 female life sentence prisoners in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales.

Prisoners' Families

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what review his Department has undertaken of the impact of imprisonment on families of prisoners; and if he will make a statement. [3285]

Ms Joyce Quin: In keeping with Prison Rule 31, which provides that special attention shall be paid to the maintenance of such relationships between a prisoner and his family as are desirable in the best interests of both, the Prison Service keeps under continuous review the impact of imprisonment on prisoners and their families, in a number of fora. These include the Prison Service Family Ties Consultative Group which comprises representatives from a wide spectrum of interests, including penal reform and family ties support groups.

Ethnic Minorities

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to redirect section 11 funding towards needs led allocation. [3023]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) on 9 June, *Official Report*, column *330*.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much money was allocated to local authorities under section 11 to assist language teaching in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [3024]

Mr. O'Brien: The table shows the amounts of grant paid to, or expected to be paid to, local authorities in relation to their expenditure within each of these years on projects which were entirely or principally concerned with

teaching English as a second language in schools. Precise disaggregation of projects containing elements of other work concerned with raising educational achievement is not possible. The figures in the table do not include grant paid in relation to projects in further education colleges, which remained a local authority responsibility in 1992–93, or grant paid in respect of adult education projects across the period, on which information is not readily available.

Section 11 Grant: ESL funding for 1992–93 to 1996–97

ESL projects

LEA	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Avon[2]	738,902	782,422	560,462	517,469	0
Barking and Dagenham	300,053	285,412	216,681	245,269	252,014
Barnet	886,259	888,470	604,181	739,744	785,198
Bedfordshire	2,728,983	2,799,311	2,095,796	1,930,291	1,977,989
Berkshire	900,858	917,565	927,074	811,214	833,522
Bexley	63,446	161,686	100,138	110,848	113,896
Birmingham	5,211,788	5,077,372	3,475,267	3,324,125	3,415,538
Bolton	716,582	731,700	558,616	578,376	594,282
Bradford	4,891,850	5,147,620	3,758,431	3,612,026	3,707,284
Brent	1,335,990	1,456,511	1,008,819	970,869	994,487
Bristol[2]	0	0	0	0	539,235
Bromley	0	0	0	19,118	22,671
Buckinghamshire	1,223,956	1,209,284	884,750	761,564	884,119
Bury	395,825	464,258	338,238	300,468	308,731
Calderdale	990,242	1,034,282	724,005	698,055	658,291
Cambridgeshire	1,137,452	1,256,649	943,296	862,061	885,768
Camden	1,232,639	1,364,312	996,706	1,231,714	1,324,898
Cardiff[2]	0	0	0	0	353,806
Cheshire	90,746	99,664	73,682	68,369	70,249
Cleveland[2]	459,449	470,930	340,541	331,799	0
Coventry	2,192,027	2,267,078	1,843,142	1,599,123	1,616,104
Croydon	956,353	1,102,874	779,056	857,263	913,168
Derbyshire[2]	1,058,739	1,406,477	1,026,632	944,899	1,040,741
Devon	15,597	15,816	11,949	42,249	59,573
Doncaster	91,925	125,714	93,665	86,240	88,611
Dorset	0	0	0	15,523	20,316
Dudley	972,476	990,148	763,374	656,613	711,594
Durham	96,533	171,737	119,090	117,811	121,051
Ealing	2,515,428	3,359,869	2,502,375	1,123,777	1,149,605
East Sussex[2]	171,546	172,010	132,752	175,571	188,022
Enfield	932,179	1,182,166	881,644	1,001,209	1,067,566
Essex	33,143	34,865	25,755	24,258	24,925
Gateshead	17,132	32,918	22,732	21,211	21,536
Gloucestershire	283,982	271,120	196,920	201,468	208,837
Greenwich	1,381,572	1,561,935	1,185,583	845,944	869,207
Gwent[2]	149,533	268,583	192,662	221,407	0
Hackney[2]	3,612,460	3,466,312	2,978,070	2,377,959	2,289,531
Hammersmith and Fulham	604,060	582,028	475,431	369,128	407,789
Hampshire	674,973	748,448	558,367	513,435	527,554
Haringey	1,695,810	2,565,456	2,113,364	1,704,835	1,751,367
Harrow	682,275	723,789	550,753	511,042	528,968
Havering	51,960	50,636	39,169	35,875	36,862
Hereford and Worcester	204,565	238,339	175,235	154,930	160,021
Hertfordshire	1,906,645	1,980,344	1,464,810	1,340,169	1,377,024
Hillingdon	287,153	297,310	244,050	203,954	209,563
Hounslow	1,556,837	1,585,688	1,157,155	1,041,080	1,069,711
Hull[2]	0	0	0	0	32,750
Humberside[2]	309,419	338,209	244,893	232,011	0
Islington	1,569,829	1,593,722	1,169,014	1,199,552	1,232,540
Kensington and Chelsea	1,007,552	1,051,241	820,563	714,954	734,615
Kent	956,653	1,074,317	882,988	736,981	757,248
Kingston	99,962	123,861	95,806	83,838	86,143
Kirklees	2,414,075	2,725,944	2,005,454	1,912,360	1,946,520
Lambeth[2]	1,204,508	1,237,070	922,583	1,001,111	1,011,152
Lancashire	4,603,652	4,838,711	3,651,180	3,164,866	3,328,182
Leeds	772,344	1,053,854	869,678	709,138	728,639
Leicestershire	3,252,152	3,580,065	2,353,001	2,401,675	2,480,992
Lewisham	1,726,023	1,825,602	1,363,705	951,038	978,279
Lincolnshire	55,236	69,958	61,319	70,972	72,924
Liverpool	119,714	139,807	110,580	113,917	112,739
Manchester	1,984,133	2,094,634	1,613,278	1,490,701	1,517,795
Merton[2]	474,754	643,576	438,356	490,188	509,289
Middlesbrough[2]	0	0	0	0	343,729
Newcastle	304,618	306,095	208,403	209,981	215,756

Section 11 Grant: ESL funding for 1992–93 to 1996–97

ESL projects

LEA	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Newham	1,978,422	1,877,198	1,384,944	1,320,239	1,381,687
Newport[2]	0	0	0	0	244,900
Norfolk[1]	58,662	65,199	57,978	44,966	109,975
North Lincolnshire[2]	0	0	0	0	178,098
North East Lincolnshire[2]	0	0	0	0	27,543
North Tyneside	132,170	139,766	100,409	95,879	98,516
North Yorkshire	58,154	65,123	49,312	44,675	45,903
Northamptonshire	497,138	473,678	357,729	324,943	333,879
Nottinghamshire	1,122,334	1,157,276	870,731	793,892	815,724
Oldham[1]	1,955,632	2,080,963	1,512,693	1,375,509	1,424,141
Oxfordshire	731,768	747,107	591,895	425,844	437,555
Redbridge	1,075,250	1,084,599	819,143	873,727	926,098
Richmond	56,087	69,014	49,864	47,343	48,645
Rochdale[1]	1,280,039	1,319,926	962,488	904,920	929,805
Rotherham	364,063	384,180	285,862	305,061	318,653
Salford	62,117	64,844	47,498	44,930	45,695
Sandwell	1,424,681	1,522,154	1,162,653	1,044,197	1,036,800
Sheffield	1,070,476	1,105,230	519,908	827,922	857,194
Shropshire	104,866	114,218	84,104	87,160	93,768
Somerset[1]	0	0	0	19,970	40,201
South Glamorgan[2]	445,116	501,949	376,219	344,337	0
South Tyneside	0	0	0	99,071	101,795
Southwark	1,651,171	1,750,683	1,356,049	563,744	610,385
St. Helens	10,307	18,975	14,043	14,571	15,379
Staffordshire	1,057,289	1,105,331	817,911	654,603	677,458
Stockport	100,052	103,265	76,079	70,839	72,788
Suffolk	268,621	286,280	214,077	196,388	201,788
Sunderland	110,656	115,825	87,284	79,456	81,641
Surrey	347,992	360,270	262,375	247,145	253,942
Sutton[1]	35,684	37,447	27,813	60,312	73,755
Swansea[1,2]	0	0	0	0	250,937
Tameside	479,674	478,072	359,057	327,957	336,976
Tower Hamlets	6,141,920	6,650,264	4,764,299	4,958,796	5,095,163
Trafford	257,277	289,973	215,001	216,777	251,797
Wakefield	281,492	348,796	251,031	210,797	230,907
Walsall	1,204,522	1,262,720	903,519	1,078,064	1,089,353
Waltham Forest	1,355,777	1,555,259	1,165,388	1,081,470	1,107,825
Wandsworth	1,637,795	1,485,719	1,374,497	998,981	991,955
Warwickshire	852,412	909,935	672,836	646,029	663,795
West Glamorgan[2]	0	0	0	224,304	0
West Sussex	260,247	280,628	212,623	192,511	197,805
Westminster	1,695,144	1,774,620	1,338,600	1,252,246	1,340,792
Wigan	56,170	60,071	44,078	55,801	59,212
Wiltshire	155,475	160,301	121,565	109,967	112,991
Wirral	60,592	95,393	75,839	0	0
Wolverhampton	1,677,545	1,746,895	1,311,354	1,063,003	1,077,042
Total	98,419,336	105,694,919	78,849,967	72,111,981	74,560,777

[1] Payments due to these authorities for the year on the basis of expenditure claimed. Some payments remain to be made.
[2] Subject to local government reorganisation in 1996.
1. Where an authority's allocation of grant covered both education and non-education projects, an estimate has been given, based on the proportion of expenditure on relevant projects.
2. Figures for 1996–97 reflect grant entitlement. Final payments will be made in 1997–98.

EUROPOL

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has received concerning the extension of the powers and duties of EUROPOL; what consultations he has initiated and with which bodies on these matters; and if he will make a statement. [3930]

Mr. Michael: EUROPOL will be a central body in the European Union for the exchange and analysis of intelligence on serious and organised trans-national crime. Its powers and duties are set out in the EUROPOL Convention, which is currently subject to ratification in member states. There have been no formal proposals to amend the Convention.

There has been discussion of EUROPOL's powers and duties in the High Level Group on Organised Crime, which was set up following the Dublin European Council in December 1996, and in the current Intergovernmental Conference. The majority of member states, including the United Kingdom, do not believe that EUROPOL should have executive powers but should support investigations and operations conducted by national law enforcement agencies. Any proposal to amend the EUROPOL Convention in this respect would be subject to a unanimous decision of the Council and to ratification in member states.

The Home Office maintains close contact with other Government Departments and operational law enforcement agencies in the United Kingdom on all

EUROPOL related matters. In addition, all significant documents to be submitted to the Council which concern EUROPOL are submitted in advance for scrutiny to the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities, the House of Commons Select Committee on European Legislation and the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee.

Asylum Seekers (Haslar)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers in Haslar Detention Centre, Gosport, have been on hunger strike in the past 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [3311]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Records show that 10 immigration detainees have refused regular prison meals at Haslar Detention Centre during the past 12 months, although they do not distinguish between those who have applied for asylum and others. There are currently no foods protesters at Haslar.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers in Haslar Detention Centre in Gosport have been detained for more than *(a)* six and *(b)* 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [3312]

Mr. O'Brien: Central records show that at Haslar Detention Centre there are 14 detainees who have been detained for more than six months and who have sought asylum at some time, and that there are three others who have been detained for more than twelve months. All 17 applications have already been refused.

Special Constabulary

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans the Government have to implement the recommendations of the report of the Working Group on Special Constabulary in England and Wales 1995–96, with particular reference to its recommendations relating to the provision of compensation for death or injury. [3419]

Mr. Michael: We are taking a fresh look at the Report's recommendations which, in general, provide a good basis for improving the efficiency, effectiveness and conditions of service of the special constabulary. Some of the recommendations have already been implemented by the Home Office and others are for police forces and police authorities to consider. Priority is now being given to the recommendations which relate to the circumstances in which special constables injured on duty will be able to receive compensation. A consultation paper is being prepared and will be sent shortly to the police and local authorities associations for their comments.

Public Safety Radio Communications

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will institute discussions with the Secretary of State for Health on the inclusion of NHS organisations in the Public Safety Radio Communications Project. [3627]

Mr. Michael: The National Health Service Ambulance Trusts are already represented on the Major Sharers Forum which communicates the views of potential users of the proposed radio communications service to the Board responsible for taking the project forward.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

NATO Membership

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the Government's policy on membership of NATO for *(a)* Estonia, *(b)* Latvia and *(c)* Lithuania. [3281]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The choice of countries to be invited to join NATO will be taken by the time of the NATO Summit in Madrid on 8–9 July. In reaching a decision with other allies we shall need to consider the wider effects on European security and on the effectiveness of the Alliance, as well as the credentials of individual countries. NATO will remain open to further enlargement after the NATO Summit in Madrid, in accordance with Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

Fisheries

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will urge Argentina to ratify the High-Seas Fishing Agreement. [3153]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I assume the right hon. Member is referring to the UN Agreement on Straddling Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks. The United Kingdom and Argentina regularly discuss their international responsibilities for the conservation of fish stocks at meetings of the South Atlantic Fisheries Commission. The United Kingdom hopes that Argentina will ratify the Convention in the near future.

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs with which nations the UK proposes to enter into regional fisheries organisations under the High-Seas Fishing agreement. [3152]

Mr. Lloyd: I assume the right hon. Member is referring to the UN Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks. The UK already participates in a number of regional fisheries organisations, including the North West Atlantic Fisheries Organisation and the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission. The UK is currently participating in talks aimed at establishing regional fisheries organisations for the South West Atlantic and the South East Atlantic.

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he estimates the UK will ratify the High-Sea Fishing Agreement. [3157]

Mr. Lloyd: I assume the right hon. Member is referring to the UN Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks which the UK signed last year. We intend that the UK should ratify this agreement when the necessary procedures have been completed.

Russia and Ukraine

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received concerning a settlement of the dispute between Russia and the Ukraine over the Black Sea fleet; and if he will make a statement. [3282]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We and our EU partners have welcomed the Russia-Ukraine agreements of 29 May on the Black Sea Fleet and the Bilateral Friendship Treaty of 31 May. They are an important contribution to regional stability and to security in Europe overall.

Hong Kong (British Prisoners)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women who are British citizens are serving (i) a life sentence of imprisonment and (ii) a sentence of imprisonment in Hong Kong; and if he will make a statement. [3204]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We are aware of 10 British citizens detained and sentenced in Hong Kong. All are men. None has received a life sentence. The British Trade Commission, which will become a Consulate General on 1 July, looks after the interests of British prisoners in Hong Kong.

Cyprus

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when a member of the British High Commission office in Cyprus last visited the Karpass area in occupied northern Cyprus; and what report has been made of that visit. [3528]

Mr. Doug Henderson: A member of the British High Commission visited the Karpass 9–10 May as part of a regular series of visits to this and other regions in Cyprus. The High Commission report no significant changes in living conditions since the previous visit in February.

Seals

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the British embassy in Moscow last contacted the Russian authorities about the cull of *(a)* harp seals and *(b)* fully grown adult seals in the White Sea; when the Russian authorities last contacted the United Kingdom on this matter; and if he will make a statement. [3691]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The British Embassy in Moscow has made repeated approaches to the Russian authorities on both questions. The last one was on 28 May. The Russian Government have not yet released their figures for the seal cull in the White Sea. We will continue to press them to do so.

Economic and Social Committee

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will review the role and functions of the Economic and Social Committee of the European Union. [3438]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The role and functions of the Economic and Social Committee are currently under discussion in the Intergovernmental Conference.

Taiwan

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what exchanges he has had with the United States with a view to securing the territorial integrity of Taiwan. [2049]

Mr. Fatchett: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs has had no exchanges with the United States on Taiwan. We acknowledge the position of the People's Republic of China that Taiwan is a province of China. We attach importance to the maintenance of peace in the Taiwan straits.

EU Foreign Affairs Spokesperson

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs by what procedure he expects the Council of Ministers to appoint a Foreign Affairs spokesperson, as proposed in drafts of the treaty of Amsterdam; under what terms such a person will operate; and what arrangements will be made for their direct consultation with the Foreign Ministers of member states prior to the exercise of their functions. [3906]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Under the Presidency's current proposal, the Secretary-General of the Council would assist the Council in the common foreign and security policy field, contributing to the formulation, preparation and implementation of policy decisions. When appropriate, he or she would conduct political dialogue with third parties on behalf of the Council at the request of the Presidency. The Secretary-General is appointed by the Council acting unanimously and would operate in this new role on the basis of clearly defined mandates from the Council.

Qualified Majority Voting

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the topics suggested for future agreement by qualified majority vote of the Council of Ministers of the European Community contained in draft proposals from the Presidency to be considered at the forthcoming Inter-Governmental Conference. [3911]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Below is the relevant section from the latest Presidency proposal:

List of Articles where extension of QMV is envisaged

Article 8a: Right of movement and residence.

Article 45(3): Compensatory aid for imports of raw materials.

Article 51: Measures in the field of social security necessary to provide freedom of movement.

Article 56(2): Coordination of provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action for special treatment for foreign nationals (right of establishment).

Article 57(2): Amendment of principles laid down by law governing the professions in a Member State.

Article 128: Culture.

Article 130: Industry.

Article 130i(1): Adoption of the research framework programme.

Article 130i(2): Adapting or supplementing the research framework programme.

Article 130o: Setting up of joint undertakings in R and T development.

Article 130s(2): Environment.

It should be noted that:

questions related to the free movement of persons shall be governed initially by unanimity but, after a transitional period of three years, should in principle fall within the scope of qualified majority voting;

the broader scope of Article 113 of the TEC implies a broader scope for QMV;

the new CFSP provisions on decision-making entail an extension for QMV;

a number of new provisions in the Treaty will also be subject to QMV;

Article 209a (countering fraud);

New Article (customs cooperation);

Article 213a (statistics);

Article 213b (protection of individuals with regard to the processing and free movement of personal data).

EU Legislative Proposals

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those areas where legislative proposals of the Council of the European Community can be halted by a resolution of the European parliament *(a)* currently and *(b)* as proposed by the Presidency to the IGC. [3909]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Measures under the following Treaty Articles are subject to the assent of, or codecision with the European Parliament:

assent: 8a(2); 105(6); 106(5); 130d; 138(3); 228(3); 0;

codecision: 49; 54(2); 56(2); 57(1); 57(2); 100a; 100b; 126(4); 128(5); 129(4); 129a(2); 129(d); 130i(1); 130s(3).

So far as further areas are concerned, below is the relevant section from the latest Presidency proposal.

Assent procedure

The assent procedure would apply to the following provisions:

New Treaty provisions

Article Fa: Sanctions in the event of a serious and persistent breach of fundamental rights by a Member State.

Existing Treaty provisions

Article O: Accession procedure.

Article 138(3): Proposals by the European Parliament for a uniform electoral procedure.

Article 228(3), second subpara: Conclusion of certain international agreements.

New Treaty provisions

Article (5): Employment—Incentive measures.

Article 119: Social policy—Equal opportunities and treatment.

Article 129: Public health (former basis Article 43—consultation):

minimum requirements regarding quality and safety of organs;

veterinary and phytosanitary measures with the direct objective the protection of public health.

Article 191a: General principles for transparency.

Article 209a: Countering fraud affecting the financial interests of the Community.

New Article: Customs cooperation.

Article 213a: Statistics.

Article 213b: Establishment of independent advisory authority on data protection.

Existing Treaty provisions[1]

Article 6: Rules to prohibit discrimination on grounds of nationality (co-operation)

Article 8a(2): Provisions for facilitating the exercise of citizens' right to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States (assent).

Article 51: Internal market (consultation):

rules on social security for Community immigrant workers.

Article 56(2)[2]: Coordination of provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action for special treatment for foreign nationals (right of establishment).

Article 57: Coordination of the provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the taking up and pursuit of activities as self-employed persons (consultation).

Amendment of existing principles laid down by law governing the professions with respect to training and conditions of access for natural persons (consultation).

Article 75(1): Transport policy (co-operation):

Common rules applicable to international transport to or from the territory of a Member State or passing across the territory of one or more Member States;

the conditions under which non-resident carriers may operate transport services within a Member State;

measures to improve transport safety.

Article 84: Transport policy (co-operation):

sea and air transport.

Social policy: Articles resulting from the transposition into the Treaty of the agreement on social policy (Article 2(2)), except for aspects of that Agreement which are currently subject to unanimity (Article 2(3)) (see Chapter 4—Social provisions)(co-operation).

Article 125: Implementing decisions relating to the European Social Fund (co-operation).

Article 127(4): Vocational training (co-operation):

Measures to contribute to the achievement of the objectives of Article 127

Article 129d 3rd subpara: Other measures (TENs) (co-operation).

Article 130d: Structural and cohesion funds.

Article 130e: ERDF implementing decisions (co-operation).

Article 130o 2nd subpara: Adoption of measures referred in Articles 130k and l—research (co-operation).

Article 130s(1): Environment (co-operation):

Action by the Community in order to achieve the objectives of Article 130r.

Article 130w: Development cooperation (co-operation).

[1] The procedure currently applicable is indicated between brackets after the content of each Article.

[2] As simplified (see CONF/4152/97).

Western European Union

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what date he received notice from the Presidency of the European Union concerning the Franco-German proposal for progressive absorption of the Western European Union into the European Union; what information that notice gave of the opinions of other member states; and what subsequent steps he has taken to inform the originators of the proposal of the opinion of Her Majesty's Government. [3907]

Mr. Doug Henderson: On 24 March the Presidency of the European Union circulated to all Partners a letter enclosing a joint proposal by Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg and Spain for the phased integration of the Western European Union into the European Union. We have made clear both in the Intergovernmental

Conference (IGC) and in bilateral meetings with Partners that we oppose the integration of the Western European Union into the European Union.

Draft Treaty of Amsterdam

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of the proposed provisions of the draft treaty of Amsterdam on the relations between the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth; and if he will initiate discussions with other Commonwealth Governments on the effect of relevant aspects of the treaty prior to its signing. [3912]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The draft Treaty is primarily concerned with internal EU matters and has no direct impact on UK/Commonwealth relations. We therefore have no plans to hold discussions with Commonwealth governments before signature of the Treaty. There will however be opportunities to discuss EU matters of interest to the Commonwealth in the margin of this year's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. In addition, the EU has regular contacts with Commonwealth countries through a wide range of co-operation agreements, notably the Lome Convention to which 38 Commonwealth countries members belong.

European Union

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the activities of the European Union described in or arising from Pillar 2, or the J articles of the treaty of European Union from which the European Commission *(a)* is currently excluded and *(b)* would be excluded under the widened scope of such title and articles as proposed by the Presidency. [3910]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Under the existing Treaty on European Union the European Commission is fully associated with the work carried out in the common foreign and security policy field. This would remain the case under current Presidency proposals.

HEALTH

High Dependency Beds

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his policy in relation to promoting the establishment of high dependency unit beds in the hospital service. [2460]

Mr. Boateng: Provision of high dependency care is one of many policy areas to which we are turning our attention.

As a first step, we have asked regional offices to report on the current position and we will be using this to take forward consideration of adult and high dependency care.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Richard Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether public funds will be made available in 1997 for the building of the new maternity hospital at the Stone Grove site in Sheffield if the PFI bid proves to be unsatisfactory. [2545]

Mr. Milburn: The private finance initiative scheme for the new maternity hospital for Central Sheffield University Hospitals NHS Trust is one of the 43 acute sector PFI projects included in the prioritisation exercise we announced on 10 June. An announcement on those schemes which have been selected to proceed will be made at the end of June.

Those trusts which fail to be prioritised will be invited to stop further work on their PFI schemes. Their projects will then be reconsidered and prioritised nationally alongside schemes that are competing for public capital. They will then be progressed under the PFI, if that is appropriate, or considered for funding from available public capital.

Historic and Heritage Buildings

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review the interest rate returns on capital requirements imposed on trusts where trust estates include historic or heritage buildings. [3041]

Mr. Milburn: The return required on a National Health Service trust's assets is affected by both the set target rate of return (currently 6 per cent.) and the value of the assets concerned.

There are currently no plans to change the target rate of return. However, following a recommendation by the Advisory Group on the Review of the Trust Financial Regime the NHS Executive is at present investigating the methods used for valuing land and buildings in the NHS. If it can be demonstrated that clear benefits would result from changes to the existing method, those changes can be implemented at the next national revaluation.

Health Promotion Shops

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his Department's assessment of the impact of health promotion shops on men's health over the next five years. [3221]

Ms Jowell: We are aware of the Acorn shop in the foyer of St. Mary's hospital in the hon. Member's constituency and there are a number of similar shops throughout England. No Department of Health assessment has been made of the impact of shops of this type on men's health. However, the Department has recently funded a project run by Community Health UK to look into the question of health promotion for men. One of the aims of this project was to identify which health promotion methods are effective for conveying messages to men. This project ended in March 1997 and we are awaiting the final evaluation.

Water Fluoridation

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what representations he has received from *(a)* Northumbrian Water Ltd. and *(b)* Water Services Association regarding the indemnities available to water companies to cover liabilities of operating a fluoridated water supply; [3208]

(2) what representations he has received from the *(a)* British Dental Association and *(b)* British Fluoridation Society regarding the decision not to extend fluoridation of water by Northumbrian Water Ltd. [3205]

Mr. Milburn: None.

Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the time scale for the United Kingdom to sign and ratify the European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine. [3313]

Ms Jowell: The Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine contains a wide range of provisions covering a number of complex ethical issues. The Government are considering the implications of the provisions and of signature and ratification. No decisions on a timescale for signature have been made.

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what arrangements he will put in place to ensure that the interests of patients are protected when any research is conducted without their consent, pursuant to article 17 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine. [3314]

Ms Jowell: Under the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine, research must not be conducted on patients capable of giving consent without such consent and this accords with current United Kingdom law. Article 17 affects only those incapable of giving consent. For the protection of patients, the Department of Health has required since 1991 that all research on National Health Service patients must be approved by an independent Local Research Ethics Committee. A range of guidance is available to members of such Committees, including a Briefing Pack issued by the Department of Health earlier this year.

General Practitioners (Complaints)

Mr. Wills: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps are taken to monitor public satisfaction with the procedure for complaints against general practitioners; and if such monitoring reveals public satisfaction to be increasing or decreasing. [3671]

Mr. Milburn: Work is under way to develop an evaluation programme which will cover all aspects of the complaints procedures.

Care of the Elderly

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to establish the Royal Commission on the costs of the care of the elderly; and what its membership and remit will be. [3449]

Mr. Boateng: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) on 5 June at column *243*.

GP Complaints

Mr. Wills: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information is collected centrally on the level of complaints against general practitioners. [3672]

Mr. Milburn: Health authorities are required to make annual returns to the National Health Service Executive providing information on the numbers, and general nature, of complaints made against general practitioners.

Dementia

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had regarding training in dementia care for professionals; and if he will make a statement. [3011]

Mr. Boateng: We have had no recent discussions on this issue. Such training is primarily the responsibility of the relevant professional bodies, the universities and the organisations which employ health and social care professionals.

The Department has contributed funding towards the provision of training material on dementia for mental health professionals. We commissioned Manchester university to produce training literature in mental health, including specific guidance on older people with mental health problems. We helped the Alzheimer's Disease Society with the production costs of their recent training pack for general practitioner trainers, "Dementia in the Community: management strategies for general practice". The Department also contributed funding to a recent feasibility study led by the British Medical Association into an educational video for GPs on dementia.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the funding of research into Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. [3012]

Mr. Boateng: The Government's commitment to the health and well being of mentally ill people is exemplified in "The Health of the Nation". The Medical research Council, the Department's Policy Research Programme and the National Health Service Research and Development Programme are all undertaking work into dementia, including Alzheimer's disease. For example, the policy research programme is contributing almost £1 million to the Medical Research Council's Cognitive Function and Ageing Study. Results of Government funded research are made freely and widely available. Research and development priorities cover a wide range of health care issues and research into Alzheimer's disease is considered along with other research priorities. Government investment in this area of research is continuing.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure the provision of specialist services for the needs of younger people who suffer from dementia. [3013]

Mr. Boateng: The Health of the Nation Handbook on Mental Health of Older People advises health and social care purchasers to work across boundaries to ensure the necessary care and treatment are available for those with early onset dementia.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on discrimination against people at risk of dementia. [3014]

Mr. Boateng: It is not possible to identify medically those at risk from dementia.

Cervical Smears

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what checks are made to ensure that departmental guidelines on the taking of cervical smears are followed. [3253]

Ms Jowell: Guidance on taking cervical smears was given in the British Society for Clinical Cytology's training video and booklet for smear-takers, "Taking Cervical Smears" which was promulgated to the NHS under cover of EL(94)33, and "Quality Assurance Guidelines for the Cervical Screening Programme" issued to the NHS in March 1996. A further training resource pack is currently in preparation by the NHS, which will include methods of audit. Copies of these guidance documents are available in the Library. It is for health authorities to ensure that quality standards in smear-taking are achieved.

Clinical Negligence

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the number of actions for clinical negligence brought against each NHS trust in the Northern and Yorkshire regions in the last two years. [3254]

Mr. Milburn: At present this information is not held centrally. However, the Department of Health is actively considering what steps can be taken to improve the range of clinical negligence data collected to get a more accurate picture of the effect of clinical negligence on National Health Service funds.

Cancer Treatment Centres

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to publish his conclusions on the location of cancer treatment centres. [3255]

Mr. Boateng: A great deal of work has been undertaken in the National Health Service to implement the recommendations contained within the document "A Policy Framework for Commissioning Cancer Services". A key element has been local discussion as to where and what cancers should be treated at each individual potential cancer centre or cancer unit. As the process is ongoing, we will continue to review progress before considering any announcement.

NHS Staff (Criminal Prosecutions)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases there have been in which NHS staff have been the subject of criminal prosecutions based on their work for the NHS in each of the last 10 years. [3256]

Mr. Milburn: I have inquired what information is available. Unfortunately, no information is held centrally. It may be held by personnel departments of individual NHS employers but could be collected only at disproportionate cost.

Cancer Surgery

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health in what circumstances a patient receiving cancer surgery has a right to be told the results of such surgery. [3257]

Mr. Boateng: We are concerned to ensure that all patients and their families, including cancer patients, who may have particular worries about their condition and treatment, including surgery, receive information which is clear, concise and easily understood, not only about the proposed treatments, but about possible alternatives and any substantial risks. A patient partnership strategy has been developed to ensure that the National Health Service gives patients and their carers greater voice and influence in their own care. This will not only increase patient satisfaction but is also likely to improve health care outcomes. This important principle has been emphasised to local health authorities, trusts and individual clinicians.

Racism

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps the General Medical Council takes to eliminate racism in the exercise of its functions of professional regulation. [3258]

Mr. Milburn: The General Medical Council has made it clear that it is committed to a system of self-regulation of the medical profession which is open and accountable; and to procedures and processes that are fair, objective, transparent and free from discrimination.

The General Medical Council's guidance *Good medical practice* states that doctors "must not discriminate against colleagues, including doctors applying for posts, because of your views of their lifestyle, culture, beliefs, race, colour, sex, sexuality, or age." and the President of the Council has made it clear that the same principle must apply, and be seen to apply, to the GMC itself.

The GMC commissioned a report by the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) in 1996 which reviewed the GMC's handling of complaints against doctors. The PSI found no evidence of overt discrimination. The GMC is commissioning a further study by PSI for later this year.

Cervical Cytology

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health in what circumstances pathologists reporting cervical cytology are permitted to advise on follow-ups without a record of the visual appearance of the cervix. [3259]

Ms Jowell: A record of the visual appearance of the cervix is a requirement on the pathology request form only in cases of suspected abnormality. Since the purpose of the cervical smear test is to detect abnormalities at a very early stage, a cervical smear can be classed abnormal in cases where the appearance of the cervix remains normal. Pathologists are expected to advise on follow-up action on the basis of an abnormal smear alone, whether or not there is a record of the visual appearance of the cervix. Where the request form explicitly states that the cervix has not been visualised, pathologists should always advise that follow-up action be taken.

Executive Directors

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the total remuneration package for the current financial year for *(a)* the highest paid executive director, indicating the title of the post, and *(b)* the chief executive of Basildon and Thurrock hospital trust. [3303]

Mr. Milburn: We are informed that the remuneration of the Executive Directors at Basildon and Thurrock General Hospital NHS Trust has not yet been agreed for the current financial year.

The total remuneration package for 1996–97 for *(a)* the highest paid executive director, the medical director, was £93,000 and *(b)* the chief executive of Basildon and Thurrock Hospital NHS Trust was £86,000. These figures are provisional and subject to audit.

Line Management Relationships

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if a code of practice exists for senior health service management which discourages spouses being in a line management relationship; and if he will make a statement. [3300]

Mr. Milburn: There is no specific code of practice. Employers are expected to follow good employment practice when involved in the recruitment and selection of staff. The actions of those who work in the National Health Service must be able to stand the test of parliamentary scrutiny, public judgments on propriety and professional codes of conduct.

Hospital Land

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what are the criteria by which trusts can determine that land within their ownership is hospital land surplus to requirements; [3301]

(2) what procedure must be followed by NHS trusts prior to resolving that land within their ownership is hospital land surplus to requirements. [3302]

Mr. Milburn: National Health Service trusts are responsible for determining their own property requirements but they must consult with the health authorities who may commission services from them (and who themselves have a statutory duty to consult on proposed substantial variations in services), and with other NHS organisations who may have an interest, before resolving that the property they own is not required for NHS purposes.

NHS trusts are required to prepare an annual business plan, supported by an estates strategy which details the plans they have for their property, which they must submit to the NHS Executive. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State may, in the interests of the NHS, prohibit or restrict the disposal of assets owned by NHS trusts.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Charles Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his Department's review of the operation of the private finance initiative for health will include consideration of the need for the full environmental impact of such projects to be taken into account. [3593]

Mr. Milburn: The Government have given a commitment to ensure that all Government Departments promote policies to sustain the environment, and any changes to the private finance initiative approvals process will take into account. Any changes to the PFI appraisal process within the National Health Service will be made in accordance with that policy.

NHS Waiting Lists

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how hospitals in the Dudley borough will be affected by the Government's commitment to cut NHS waiting lists by an extra 100,000 patients. [3648]

Mr. Milburn: Our manifesto commitment is to treat an extra 100,000 patients through reducing bureaucracy. Linked to this is our commitment to end waiting times for cancer surgery, especially breast cancer. We have already announced an initiative to improve breast cancer services (22 May). We will be discussing our future plans with the National Health Service before making any final decisions about the exact scope of our targets and how quickly we will expect them to be achieved.

Medical Negligence

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to take steps to limit the amount of NHS money which is to be paid out to patients who sue for negligence or medical accidents; and what plans he has for a no-fault medical accident compensation scheme. [3405]

Mr. Milburn: The Government have every sympathy with those who suffer adversely as a consequence of clinical treatment. Where negligence can be shown to have caused this it seems only right that compensation should be available, and the Government is currently exploring alternatives to litigation which might offer a quicker and cheaper way of dealing with clinical negligence claims. However, it is a longstanding principle that compensation should be paid by the National Health Service only when there is evidence that negligence has been involved.

Children (Care)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve services for children who are looked after by local authorities; and by what means young people in care will be consulted about proposed changes. [3401]

Mr. Boateng: The Children Act 1989, and other relevant legislation, gives local authorities the responsibility for looking after children in public care.

The Department supports them in their role in a variety of ways, for example: statutory guidance; professional and practice guidance; and the "Looking After Children" system and materials which provides local authorities who chose to use it with a framework to capture information about the development of individual children to ensure that their needs are properly met within a care plan which involves the child, their families and carers. The Department also commissions and disseminates a range of research.

A reports is expected in the summer from Sir William Utting on safeguards for children living away from home, including those in public care. In considering Sir William's report the Government will take the opportunity of discussing with local authorities and other interests, including those representing children, what further steps might be usefully taken to improve services for children who are looked after by local authorities.

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children were looked after by local authorities in England and Wales on 1 April 1997 broken down by local authority and type of placement; how many children left care in each authority in 1996–97; and how many of those moved to secure tenancies in *(a)* the public housing sector and *(b)* the private housing sector. [3400]

Mr. Boateng: Information on the number of children looked after by each local authority in England at 31 March 1995, including types of placement and the

number of children who ceased to be looked after, is given in Tables 1 and 4 in the publication "Children Looked After by local authorities, year ending 31 March 1995, England", copies of which are available in the Library. The corresponding figures for the year ending 31 March 1996 are due to be published in August 1997. Local authorities have until 30 June 1997 to return their data on children looked after at 31 March 1997 to the Department of Health; this information is therefore unavailable at present.

Information on the subsequent accommodation of young people who have ceased to be looked after is not collected centrally.

Statistics on children looked after in Wales are a matter for my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Wales.

Radiotherapy

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement regarding his Department's policy towards compensation payments to women who claim to have been injured through receiving radiotherapy treatment; and what steps his Department is taking to investigate the causes of this problem. [3394]

Mr. Boateng: The Government have every sympathy with women who have suffered adverse side-effects as a consequence of radiotherapy treatment. However, it is a longstanding principle that compensation should be paid by the National Health Service only when there is evidence that negligence has been involved.

The following action has been taken to help women with damage as a result of radiotherapy for breast cancer:

In May 1994 the Department issued guidance entitled "Quality Assurance in Radiotherapy—A Quality Management System for Radiotherapy".

The Royal College of Radiologists at the Department's request, convened a small group of professionals and lay people in Autumn 1994 to consider guidelines for care of women who have suffered tissue damage following radiotherapy for breast cancer. This report was issued to the NHS by the Department in October 1995.

The Royal College of Radiologists carried out a confidential clinical review of 126 women who had suffered injury following radiotherapy treatment for breast cancer at 15 centres in the period 1980–1993. The report makes recommendations on the management of breast cancer, particularly on radiotherapy, and for further research.

With regard to those suffering adverse effects following pelvic radiotherapy for gynaecological cancers, in 1996, a Working Group, which includes representatives from a number of Royal Colleges, voluntary organisations and the Department, was set up to consider the preparation of patient information leaflets concerning possible adverse effects following pelvic radiotherapy and to raise awareness generally. A sub-group is also considering issuing guidelines for health professionals on the care of women suffering adverse effects as a result of pelvic radiotherapy.

Asthma

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what levels of asthma have been recorded in the Torbay parliamentary constituency in each year since 1987; and what the national average levels of asthma were in each year since 1987. [3781]

Ms Jowell: According to the available data provided by South and West Devon Health Authority, in-patient finished consultant episodes for asthma in the borough of Torbay are as follows:

	Asthma in any diagnostic position	*Asthma as the main diagnosis*
1993–94	484	233
1994–95	570	236
1995–96	785	217
1996–97	796	243

Nationally, there is no comprehensive data on the number of people with asthma.

According to data collected by the Royal College of General Practitioners, the mean weekly incidence of new general practitioner episodes of asthma per 100,000 population in England for each year since 1987 was as follows:

1987: 27.2

1988: 33.3

1989: 34.0

1990: 37.3

1991: 46.3

1992: 48.3

1993: 50.3

1994: 49.2

1995: 40.3

1996: 38.2.

Silicone Breast Implants

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will implement a moratorium on the use of silicone breast implants until the review on their use has been completed; and if he will introduce an immediate directive ensuring that all plastic surgeons only operate when the patient has given their informed consent. [2300]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 6 June 1997]:* An independent expert group has on two occasions (in 1992 and 1994) found no evidence of a link between silicone breast implants and connective tissue disease. In view of the renewed concerns of patients the Department of Health has now set up a further review (May 1997). This will look particularly at issues relating to preoperative advice and counselling to patients. However, the scientific evidence does not currently suggest the need for a moratorium or immediate directives to plastic surgeons. Further action will be considered in the light of the review findings.

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the names of the experts on the panel of the review of the use of silicone breast implants. [2301]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 6 June 1997]:* The names of the members of the Independent Review Group are as follows:

Professor R. D. Sturrock (Chairman): Professor of Rheumatology

Professor R. Batchelor: Professor of Immunology

Professor Alan Silman: Professor of Epidemiology

Mr. T. M. Milward: Consultant Plastic Surgeon

Professor J. P. Sloane: Professor of Histopathology

Professor D. R. London: Formerly Professor of Medicine.

PRIME MINISTER

National Lottery

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister when his office briefed the media about his opinion of bonuses to Camelot directors. [3776]

The Prime Minister: On 28 May.

Royal Commissions

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Prime Minister how many *(a)* reviews and *(b)* Royal commissions the Government have established; and how many of each it plans to establish in the next year. [3026]

The Prime Minister: Significant reviews which we have announced include:

A comprehensive spending review;

A strategic defence review;

A review of the bureaucratic burden on teachers;

A review of detailed criteria used in considering license applications for the export of conventional weapons;

A review of the law relating to surrogacy;

A review of the law relating to silicone breast implants;

a review of proposed NHS private finance initiative schemes;

A review of the breast cancer screening service in Devon and implications for the breast cancer screening programme as a whole;

A review of the arrangements for celebrating the Millennium;

A review of the National Lottery, leading to the publication of a White Paper;

A review of film policy;

A review of steps which might be taken to strengthen local democratic control of the three public water authorities in Scotland;

Scottish Enterprise has been asked to bring forward its planned review of strategy to encourage a more effective, responsive and accountable enterprise network in Scotland;

A review of the way in which social rented housing is supported in Scotland;

A review of the Skye Bridge tolling arrangements;

A fundamental review of transport policy leading to the publication of a White Paper on our long term strategy for an integrated transport policy;

A review of the arrangements for enforcing the rules on the welfare of animals exported live to the continent;

A review of the case for inoculation as a substitute for the quarantine of animals;

A review of the international development policies leading to a publication of a White Paper in the Autumn;

A review of economic regeneration in Wales;

We made clear in the Labour manifesto our plans to review ministerial accountability, to implement the Nolan recommendations fully and extend them to all public bodies. These will be among the various matters to be reviewed in preparation of the White Paper on Better Government which we intend to publish in the Autumn.

No Royal Commissions have been established.

The announcements of any further reviews will be made when those reviews are initiated.

Political Appointments

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Prime Minister if he will set out the salaries of each of the political appointees to assist the Prime Minister and other Ministers on a Department by Department basis. [3403]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) on 10 June, *Official Report*, column *390*.

Security Service Commissioner's Report

Lorna Fitzsimons: To ask the Prime Minister when the Annual report of the commissioner appointed under the Security Service Act 1989 will be laid before the House; and if he will make a statement. [4262]

The Prime Minister: A copy of Lord Justice Stuart Smith's seventh annual report, for 1996, has been laid before the House in accordance with section 4(6) of the Security Service Act 1989. The confidential annex to the report has been excluded from that copy in accordance with section 4(7) of the 1989 Act. I am grateful to the Commissioner for his work in providing assistance to the Tribunal as provided in that Act and for reviewing the issue of warrants under the Intelligence Services Act 1994.

Civil Service Appointments

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list by name and office each current political appointee to the Civil Service indicating their job description, salary and terms of employment; and how many appointees are required to carry out duties previously performed by a civil servant. [3050]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 12 June 1997]:* I refer the hon. Member to the replies that I gave to the hon. Members for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) and for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) on 2 June, *Official Report*, columns *97–9*. Jonathan Powell and Alastair Campbell have been appointed under the terms of the amended Civil Service Order in Council which allows them to undertake some duties which would previously have been performed by civil servants.

General Elections

Kate Hoey: To ask the Prime Minister if he will introduce legislation to require general elections to be held at weekends. [3348]

The Prime Minister: We have no plans to do so at present.

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 2 June, *Official Report*, column *98*, when he expects to be able to provide the information on total salary bills for special advisers. [3760]

The Prime Minister: When agreement has been reached with each individual on their precise employment terms.

Welsh Assembly (Ministerial Functions)

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the functions of the Secretary of State for Wales and other Welsh Office ministers when Welsh Office functions are transferred to a Welsh Assembly. [3288]

The Prime Minister: There will continue to be a Secretary of State for Wales who will represent Welsh interests in the Cabinet. The forthcoming White Paper on the Government's proposals for a Welsh Assembly will set out more details.

Secretary of State for Wales

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Prime Minister if he will introduce proposals to require that the Secretary of State for Wales represents a Welsh constituency. [3289]

The Prime Minister: No.

Task Forces

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the task forces and groups which have been instituted across Government departments, their aims and objectives, the composition of each group and when each is expected to report. [2544]

The Prime Minister: I announced on 9 June, *Official Report,* columns *302-10,* the composition and terms of reference of the Ministerial Committees of the Cabinet which I have established.

My Government have also announced the establishment of the following task forces and groups:

The Task Force on Youth Justice

The Task Force's Role is to advise Home Office Ministers on Government proposals for the development of youth justice policies.

The President of the Board of Trade's Advisory Group

The group's remit is to advise the President of the Board of Trade on competitiveness. It is not expected to issue any formal reports.

Competitiveness Working Parties

A number of expert groups will report to the President's Advisory Group on different aspects of competitiveness. Each group will include business people and others who could contribute an expert view to the Working Parties' remit. Each Working Party will be reporting by the end of 1997.

Interdepartmental Task Force on Competitiveness in Europe

The Task Force's role is to advise on the implementation of the Government's Manifesto objectives to complete the Single Market and promote flexible labour markets across the EU. No formal report is planned.

Export Forum

The Forum will carry out a full assessment of how well our export programmes work by:

looking at the strengths and weaknesses of official support for trade fairs, trade missions, identifying leads, export market research, UK firms bidding for overseas projects, and other export promotion activities;

examining the current arrangements for interdepartmental consultation, the current arrangements for consultation with business, the interface between the Overseas Trade Services and Business Links, the present system for establishing market and sectoral priorities and marketing and branding of official export promotional services.

The Forum will report by the Autumn.

UK Presidency Task Force

This Task Force will continue to meet until the end of the UK Presidency of the European Union in June 1998, at Ministerial and official level.

Tax-benefit Working Group

This Working Group will examine the interaction of the tax and benefits system so that they can be streamlined and modernised, so as to fulfil the objectives of promoting work incentives, reducing poverty and welfare dependency, and strengthening community and family life.

New Deal Advisory Task Force

This Task Force will advise Government on the key issues of programme policy and design. It will promote the New Deal, particularly to the business and voluntary sectors, stimulating action and commitment in these sectors. The Task Force will also receive regular reports on and advice on progress on implementation of the New Deal, flagging up emerging issues and advising on their resolution.

Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Task Forces will also be established.

School Standards Task Force

This Task Force's roles are to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on the development and implementation of policies to improve school standards and to keep the Secretary of State abreast of best practice nationally and internationally.

NHS Efficiency Task Force

This Task Force will examine areas of NHS expenditure with a view to redirecting resources to patient services.

The announcements of any further Task Forces or groups will be made when we come to establish those groups.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Wigs

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will review the practice of wearing wigs in court so that solicitors with a right of audience and barristers are treated on an equal basis. [2995]

Mr. Hoon: The LCD has no immediate plans to review the wearing of wigs in court. This issue was considered by the Department through consultation papers in 1992 and 1994. There was no consensus among all of those who responded about whether solicitors should be allowed to wear a wig in court although a majority wanted the wearing of wigs generally to be discontinued. The Lord Chancellor, having consulted with the Lord Chief Justice and the Heads of Division, concluded that the practice of wearing wigs should not be extended.

Freemasonry

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he is taking to establish whether there is a freemasons' lodge in the Lord Chancellor's Department. [2999]

Mr. Hoon: I have not sought to establish if there is a freemasons' lodge in the Lord Chancellor's Department. The Home Affairs Committee recently held an inquiry into freemasonry in the criminal justice system. The Government will be responding to its report in due course.

Civil Court Procedures

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals he has evaluated relating to communitisation of procedures and rules in civil court procedures in respect of legislation originating from the European Commission or Union. [3929]

Mr. Hoon: During the negotiations preceding the Intergovernmental Conference the Government have considered various proposals relating to civil judicial co-operation, one of which would apply Community legislative procedures to this field. This matter is currently governed by Title VI of the Treaty on European Union (intergovernmental co-operation in justice and home affairs) and the Government consider the present arrangements broadly satisfactory. It is one of the matters for discussion at the Amsterdam Conference which began today.

Payments to Witnesses

Mr. Ashton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, if he intends to pursue and publish the report on the payment of trial witnesses by the media which was announced in the last Parliament and reported on by the National Heritage Select Committee. [2966]

Mr. Hoon: My Department issued a consultation document, "Payments to Witnesses", in October last year and the responses to that are under consideration. A response to the report of the National Heritage Select Committee will be made in the next few weeks.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Sports Council

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what discussions his Department has held with the Scottish Office, the Welsh Office and the Northern Ireland Office concerning the appointment of a chairman or chairwoman of the United Kingdom Sports Council; and if he will make a statement. [2753]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 9 June 1997]:* Further to my reply to the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) of 21 May, *Official Report*, column *69*, I can confirm that my right hon. Friend invited Sir Rodney Walker, chairman of the English Sports Council, to take on temporarily the role of acting chairman of the United Kingdom Sports Council following consultation with the home country Departments. He will be consulting home country Secretaries of State to confirm the appointment of a full-time successor to Lord MacLaurin of Knebworth as chairman of the United Kingdom Sports Council. A further statement will be made in due course.

National Lottery

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to speed up the processing of smaller-scale lottery bids. [3140]

Mr. Tony Banks: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is currently reviewing all aspects of national lottery distribution, including the way in which applications for small awards are dealt with. We shall be publishing our proposals for consultation next month.

Concessionary Television Licences

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to review the regulations governing concessionary television licences in sheltered housing establishments. [3146]

Mr. Fisher: The Government have no plans at present to review the concessionary television licence fee regulations.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how many television licence holders are over 75 years old. [3160]

Mr. Fisher: This information is not available, as TV licensing does not record the age of television licence holders. There are approximately 3.07 million UK households with one or more members aged 75 or over, of which an estimated 2.44 million consist solely of people of that age.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what communications he has had from the Secretary of State for Social arising from her oral answer of 2 June, *Official Report*, column 28, regarding concessionary television licences for pensioners. [3711]

Mr. Fisher: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security has drawn my hon. Friend's comments of 2 June, *Official Report*, columns *5-6*, to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for National Heritage. The Government have no plans at present to extend the existing concessionary television licence scheme.

Lottery Funds

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what powers he has to ensure that archives purchased with lottery funds with special reference to the Churchill papers are insured. [2992]

Mr. Tony Banks: The Secretary of State's powers in relation to the distribution of lottery funds are contained in the National Lottery etc. Act 1993 and in policy and financial directions. The Government look to distributing bodies to ensure that suitable insurance arrangements apply in respect of lottery-funded projects. For projects relating to archives the relevant distributing body is normally the Heritage Lottery Fund, whose standard grant conditions include a requirement that the property concerned must be appropriately insured. I understand that the Churchill Archive Centre has insured against damage or loss of the Churchill papers and that separate cover is obtained when papers from the collection are exhibited elsewhere.

Sport (Tobacco Sponsorship)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what discussions he has had with Worcestershire County Cricket Club about tobacco sponsorship of cricket; and if he will make a statement. [2733]

Mr. Tony Banks: I have had no discussions with Worcestershire County Cricket Club about tobacco sponsorship of cricket, but I intend to consult relevant sports bodies on their concerns.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage (1) what assessment he has made of the impact on motor sport of the proposed ban on tobacco sponsorship of the sport; and if he will make a statement; [2732]

(2) what assessment he has made of the impact on cricket of the proposed ban on tobacco sponsorship of the sport; and if he will make a statement. [2731]

Mr. Banks: We are looking very carefully at how best to achieve an end to the advertising and promotion of tobacco at sports events in a way which will minimise any damage to sports, such as cricket and motor racing. The details, including proposals for legislation to ban tobacco advertising, will be published in the White Paper later this year. Any legislation will include a transitional period.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

National Audit Office

39. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission how many inquiries he anticipates will be undertaken by the National Audit Office in the current Parliamentary Session. [2035]

Mr. Sheldon: The National Audit Office expects to audit and report as necessary on 550 accounts and produce 50 studies on value for money subjects in this session.

40. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the number of staff available to the National Audit Office. [2036]

Mr. Sheldon: It is the main concern of the Commission to ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General has the right resources to undertake his work. The Comptroller and Auditor General considers annually the staffing implications of developments which affect his remit and reflects them in the Supply Estimates for the National Audit Office which the Commission considers each year. Were he to need more staff or other resources, he would request extra resources from this House when compiling his Supply Estimate.

Role of the Commission

41. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission what representations he has received about the possibility of widening the remit of the Public Accounts Commission. [2037]

Mr. Sheldon: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend, the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). The remit of the Public Accounts Commission is set out in the National Audit Act 1983 but if my hon. Friend has any suggestions about widening the remit I should be happy to receive them. I have not so far received any representations on this matter.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

St. Ethelburga's Church

42. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what is the latest position regarding the rebuilding and use of St. Ethelburga's church in the City; and if he will make a statement. [2038]

Mr. Stuart Bell: In March the Bishop of London announced a proposal for St. Ethelburga's to be restored as a centre of peace and reconciliation, providing support for the victims of terrorism and conflict. It would include a memorial garden dedicated to those killed in the two city bombs. The church's facade to Bishopsgate would be re-built and the surviving fabric incorporated in the new building. The proposal would require listed building consent and a scheme under the Pastoral Measure 1983 to authorise the new use. The Commissioners await a recommendation from the diocese of London to draft and publish such a scheme.

Pensions Measure

43. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what consultations have taken place with parishes since the Pensions Measure 1997 was approved by Parliament. [2039]

Mr. Stuart Bell: Consultations with individual parishes are a matter for dioceses. The Commissioners have been consulting closely with Diocesan Boards of Finance about transitional assistance, which the Commissioners will provide so that the cost of pension contributions can be absorbed by dioceses and parishes over a manageable period.

Annual Report

Mr. Flynn: To ask the hon. Member as representing the Church Commissioners how much of the income from each source shown in the consolidated statement on page 24 of the Church Commissioners' annual report for 1996 was *(a)* restricted and *(b)* unrestricted. [1842]

Mr. Stuart Bell: All the income identified in the question was unrestricted. The Commissioners' restricted income, i.e. income which it is not within the Commissioners' discretion to allocate between their general objectives, is dealt with in the note on page 45 of their annual report.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the hon. Member as representing the Church Commissioners how much of the £145.9 million net income shown in the consolidated statement on page 24 of the Church Commissioners' annual report for 1996 contributes to the surplus of £1.9 million mentioned in note 28 on the accounts. [1840]

Mr. Bell: The short table may help to explain the relationship between these figures.

£ million

	Consolidated	*Commissioners only*
Net income after interest and asset management costs	145.9	138.8

£ million

	Consolidated	Commissioners only
Total expenditure on behalf of the church	(136.2)	(136.2)
Commissioners own administrative costs	(0.7)	(0.7)
Surplus of income over expenditure for the year	9.0	1.9

The reason for the consolidated income exceeded the Commissioners' own income is that the income of the Commissioners' subsidiary companies in 1996 exceeded the dividends they paid to the Commissioners in that year.

Church Income

Mr. Flynn: To ask the hon. Member as representing the Church Commissioners how much income was received by the Church Commissioners in 1996 on the specific trusts of section 10(6) of the Church Commissioners Measure of 1947. [1841]

Mr. Stuart Bell: All the income of the Church Commissioners was received on the trusts of section 10(6) of the Church Commissioners Measure as expanded by subsequent legislation.

I am sending the hon. Member additional information about the nature of the Commissioners' trusts.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

ENVIRONMENT AND THE REGIONS

Environmental Standards

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the use of economic instruments as a means of promoting higher environmental standards. [3021]

Angela Eagle: The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions recently set out his attitude to economic instruments in his speech at the conference on Earth Summit II.

He said:

"Whatever the environmental concern, we must find the best way to deal with it, and ensure that the polluter bears the cost of measures required. A regulatory approach is often the right one, to ensure consistent standards of environmental protection. Voluntary agreements can also work well in the right circumstances. And economic instruments also have a role, which is why our Manifesto highlighted the use of taxes to discourage pollution.

Tax is not a popular word. But environmental taxes can encourage industry to find cost effective, innovative ways of reducing pollution. They can be particularly attractive if they provide revenue which may be used to reduce other taxes, or recycled in other ways. This is not to say they are always appropriate - for example if they would have unacceptable social and distributional effects. What we must do is to consider how to achieve the best package of measures to meet our environmental objectives."

Household Growth Projection

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the reliability of the figure for the projected increase in the number of households up to 2016. [2858]

Mr. Raynsford: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) on 3 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *163*.

Climate Change

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Government plans to publish a climate change action programme; and if he will make a statement. [3194]

Mr. Meacher: We are currently reviewing the United Kingdom's Climate Change Programme looking at policies and measures across all sectors which could contribute to a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions from 1990 levels by 2010. These include improvements in areas such as domestic and industrial energy efficiency, measures to tackle emissions from the transport sector as part of the integrated transport strategy, and a large increase in the amount of electricity generated from renewable sources and combined heat and power schemes. We shall produce a revised Programme after Kyoto.

New Forest

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for the establishment of a New Forest national park. [3144]

Angela Eagle: The designation of new National Parks is the responsibility of the Countryside Commission. Ministers will meet shortly with the Countryside Commission to discuss the potential for new National Parks in England, as well as the Commission's proposals for the future funding and management of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Drinking Water (Cryptosporidium)

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Drinking Water Inspectorate plans to publish the findings of its investigation into the alleged cryptosporidium outbreak in drinking water from the Gilstead treatment works in Bingley, West Yorkshire, in June 1993. [3673]

Angela Eagle: The investigation by the Drinking Water Inspectorate of this incident is continuing. As is standard practice, as part of its investigations, the Inspectorate is considering whether there is a case for prosecuting Yorkshire Water plc under section 70 of the Water Industry Act 1991 for the alleged offence of supplying water unfit for human consumption. The timing of the publication of the Inspectorate's findings will depend on whether or not there is a prosecution.

Diving Equipment (Costs)

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the cost to public funds of the diving suit and accoutrements he wore on 8 June off St. Mary's Island. [3523]

Mr. Prescott: None, unlike the asking and answering of this question. The diving equipment was kindly loaned to me at no cost to the public, and my dive highlights this Government's belief that actions, not words, will protect our seas into the next century.

CITES (Elephants)

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will instruct the United Kingdom delegation to the forthcoming convention in international trade in endangered species in Zimbabwe to oppose proposals to downlist elephants from Appendix I to Appendix II of CITES. [3347]

Angela Eagle: The UK delegation will consider the proposals to downlist elephants from Appendix I to Appendix II of CITES, taking account of all the evidence available, the views of Range states, and the Conference debate. The Government's main objective is to help African countries to protect elephants against the threats they face from declining habitat and ivory poachers. A final decision will be taken during the Conference in co-ordination with other EU Member States.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what *(a)* timetable and *(b)* process will be followed for the removal of capping on the budgets of local authorities. [3741]

Mr. Raynsford: We have given a commitment to do away with crude and universal capping, although we will retain reserve powers to control excessive council tax increases. We are now considering ways to implement our commitment.

Earth Summit 2

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the UK delegates to the Earth Summit 2 Conference. [3745]

Angela Eagle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) on Tuesday 10 June 1997, *Official Report* columns *392–93*. Further to that reply the following officials from the Department for International Development will also attend:

Mr. B. Ireton

Mr. A. Bennett

Mr. A. Smith

Mr. A. Wray

Ms K. Johnson

Mr. D. Harris

Mr. P. Aylett.

Out-of-town Development

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps his Department is taking to review planning policy guidance in respect of out-of-town retail parks and shopping centres; and when his Department will publish the revised guidance. [2573]

Mr. Raynsford: We have no current plans to review PPG6, although we are concerned to apply it firmly and consistently, and to monitor its effectiveness. The Government is currently considering its response to the more detailed and specific matters raised by the Environment Committee's report on shopping centres.

British Gas Sites (Decontamination)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure that public sites owned by British Gas are properly decontaminated before development is allowed on those sites. [3406]

Angela Eagle: It is the responsibility of local planning authorities, when determining planning applications for land which may be contaminated, to consider whether the proposal takes proper account of any contamination. In certain circumstances, it may be necessary for detailed site investigation or specific remedial measures to be made conditions of the planning permission.

Development Corporations

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the development corporations currently in existence and the dates on which they will cease to exist. [4011]

Angela Eagle: The urban development corporations currently in existence in England are as follows:

Birmingham Heartlands

Black Country

London Docklands

Merseyside

Plymouth

Sheffield

Teesside

Trafford Park

Tyne and Wear.

Sheffield Development Corporation ceased its operational business on 31 March 1997 and will be dissolved on 1 July 1997. Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary orders, the remaining development corporations will cease operations on 31 March 1998 and will be dissolved on 1 July 1998, after a three month period in which to prepare their final accounts and report and wind up their affairs.

There are also development corporations in Cardiff Bay and in Laganside. Responsibility for them rests with my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Wales and Northern Ireland respectively.

Allotments

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he intends to take to protect allotments from development. [3780]

Mr. Raynsford: Statutory provisions already exist which afford protection to certain types of allotment. The Allotments Act 1925 provides that where land has been purchased or appropriated for use as allotments, it cannot be disposed of or used for any other purpose without the consent of the Secretary of State. Any land disposed of would still be subject to the usual planning requirements.

The Government believes that these controls provide appropriate protection to allotment sites and has no plans to amend them.

Nuclear Waste

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he intends to take to identify storage or disposal sites in the United Kingdom for nuclear waste, or other radioactive materials which have *(a)* been abandoned and *(b)* had their function changed since nuclear activities took place on site. [3941]

Angela Eagle: The Government is considering how best to apply the provisions of the 1995 Environment Act to radioactively contaminated land. These include the identification of radioactively contaminated sites.

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he proposes to take over British Nuclear Fuels plans to transport nuclear waste for recycling at Sellafield by air. [3402]

Ms Glenda Jackson: BNFL have no plans to transport by air nuclear materials to Sellafield for reprocessing.

However, Mixed Oxide Fuel (MOX) has been safely transported from Sellafield by air since 1973 in packages meeting International Atomic Energy Agency standards.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport has agreed to talk to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) about routeing, to see what might be done to ensure that overflights of urban areas are avoided as far as possible.

Mobile Homes (Council Tax)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for the revaluation of mobile homes and caravans to ensure they are placed in a council tax band related to their real market value. [3908]

Mr. Raynsford: For council tax purposes all chargeable dwellings, including mobile homes and caravans, are placed in a valuation band according to their open market value on 1 April 1991. The question of whether any changes should be made to the existing structure of the valuation bands is one that I shall wish to discuss with the Local Government Association and others, before reaching a view.

Homelessness

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to help the voluntary sector to alleviate the current problems of homelessness. [3799]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government places great value on the work of the voluntary sector in the prevention and relief of homelessness. This year the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is providing £7.9 million in grants to fund 195 projects, run by voluntary sector organisations, that help single people in housing need. The voluntary sector has also played a major role in the Rough Sleepers Initiative. My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing has recently announced £17.2 million in funding to voluntary sector organisations and housing associations, to be spent over the next two years, to extend provisions for people who are sleeping rough to twelve areas outside central London.

Links with the voluntary sector have been strengthened by the secondment of Ian Brady, deputy Chief Executive of Centrepoint, to the Department. Mr. Brady will be promoting guidance and encouraging the development of local strategies to ensure that there is no necessity for people to sleep rough. He will also chair a Rough Sleepers Forum of homelessness charities to help co-ordinate national efforts to tackle rough sleeping.

TRANSPORT

Bus Employees (Pension Fund)

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Bus Employees' Superannuation Trust Pension Fund. [3946]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer my hon. Friend to my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) on 20 May, *Official Report*, column *53*.

Derailment (Bexley)

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and Regions if the cause of the derailment of a freight train at Bexley on 4 February has been established. [3222]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) independent investigation into the freight train derailment at Bexley is continuing. The investigation is complex and it would be premature to speculate as to the cause. HSE intends to make public its findings once it has completed its enquiries.

Rolling Stock (Safety)

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the policy of the Health and Safety Executive on the use of MK 1 rolling stock on British railways until 2007. [3223]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Health and Safety Commission and Executive are currently working towards setting a firm timetable for the withdrawal or modification of Mark 1 rolling stock well before 2007. The Executive

will shortly write to train operating companies and other interested parties, seeking their views on ways of securing that aim.

Rail Track Maintenance

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mr. Dunwoody) of 22 May, *Official Report,* column *159,* what powers exist to oblige Railtrack to accept an amendment to their licence to ensure delivery of investment in infrastructure. [3242]

Ms Glenda Jackson: If Railtrack do not accept a proposed amendment to their network licence by agreement, the Rail Regulator has the power under Section 13 of the Railways Act 1993 to refer the proposed amendment to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission for investigation, determination and report. If the MMC decide that the proposed amendment is in the public interest, the Regulator can, in line with the procedures set out in Section 15 of the Act, impose the licence amendment.

South West Trains

Mr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make an assessment of the proposals of South West Trains to introduce rolling stock which restricts the availability of space for bicycles; what assessment he has made of the compliance of such rolling stock with the undertakings provided upon receipt of the franchise by Stagecoach plc; and if he will make a statement. [3286]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The South West Trains Franchise Agreement requires the franchise operator to make facilities available for the carriage of bicycles on trains so far as this is reasonably practicable and subject to the availability of appropriate space on the rolling stock. The specifications of the new South West Trains' rolling stock are a matter for South West Trains, having regard to this provision.

The Government is keen to see proper facilities for cyclists who wish to use the railway. We are currently reviewing the Franchising Director's Objectives, Instructions and Guidance and, as part of our review, we will be considering what action the Franchising Director should take to encourage increased carriage of cycles on trains.

Radioactive Material (Transport)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the specifications of the packaging used for *(a)* surface transport of radioactive material, *(b)* air-shipment of radioactive material and *(c)* flight data recorders. [3134]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Packages used for air and surface transport of radioactive material are expected to meet a series of performance standards, which are to be found in the document published by the International Atomic Energy Agency entitled "Regulations for the Safe Transport of Radioactive Material 1985 Edition (As Amended 1990)" a copy of which is in the library. The standards are accepted world-wide and are the same for all modes of transport.

There is no set specification for flight data recorders, this is left to the authorities of individual countries. However the latest standard to be applied in the UK is contained in the European Organisation for Civil Aviation Equipment specification ED-55 "Minimum Operational Specification for Flight Data Recorder Systems", a copy of which will be placed in the library.

Dr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many consignments of MOX fuel been transported by air in the United Kingdom in the last 12 months; and what type of packaging was used. [3133]

Ms Jackson: There have been five such consignments within the last 12 months. All the consignments were carried in Type B packages, approved and certificated for use within the United Kingdom, in accordance with UK statutory requirements.

Dr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the implementation date of the new IAEA recommendations on the transport of radioactive material. [3132]

Ms Jackson: In order to keep its domestic legislation governing the transport of radioactive material in line with international modal regulations, the UK plans to use the implementation dates to be set by the relevant international modal organizations. The secretariats of the relevant organizations have agreed to recommend a common implementation date of 1 January 2001.

Speed Restrictions

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will instruct local authorities to re-examine the case for speed restrictions where previous road traffic accidents have resulted in fatalities. [3634]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Guidance provided by the Department to local authorities on setting speed limits, contained in Circular Roads 1/93, includes a recommendation that the accident history should be a factor in determining the imposition of a particular speed limit. But it is for local authorities themselves to decide what to do.

Heathrow Airport (Terminal 5)

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's policy towards the planning application for a Fifth Terminal at Heathrow Airport. [3670]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I confirm that the Government is adhering to a policy of strict neutrality in respect of the planning application by BAA plc for a Fifth Terminal at Heathrow. We are placed in a quasi-judicial position because the determination of the application will be the responsibility of the Secretary of State. The public inquiry into BAA's application is currently under way, and we will study the resultant Inspector's report carefully before reaching any decision on the issues that are being examined.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what decision he has reached on the proposed Birmingham Northern Relief Road; and if he will make a statement. [3751]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Inspector's report on the 1994–95 public inquiry into the proposed Birmingham Northern Relief road has been received and is being considered. No decision has been taken on the scheme.

Public Transport (Merseyside)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to encourage the use of public transport in Merseyside. [4017]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Guidance relating to the 1998–99 Transport Policies and Programmes (TPP) budget will shortly be issued to local authorities and passenger transport authorities. This guidance will emphasise that bids for funding must demonstrate effective plans for reducing car dependency and encouraging other modes of transport including public transport, cycling and walking. Package bids will be partly assessed on the extent to which they provide for the development of integrated and sustainable transport policies.

Through the TPP, Capital Challenge and Objective 1 programmes a substantial investment has been made in improving the public transport infrastructure in Merseyside and it is anticipated that future Package bids within the region will, through appropriate targets for bus and rail passenger usage, adequately reflect the value of this investment.

TREASURY

Single Currency

Mr. Cash: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if his plans for the future role of the Bank of England fulfil the criteria required for joining the single currency. [1693]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 12 June 1997]:* The proposed changes to the Bank of England will not make it compatible with the requirements in the Treaty which would apply if the United Kingdom were to adopt the single currency.

G7 Economic Summit, Denver

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what matters with regards to the environment he intends to raise at the G7 Economic summit in Denver. [2875]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson *[holding answer 10 June 1997]:* Along with his colleagues my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be seeking to argue for policies to promote sustainable development. We will ensure sustainable economic growth only by making all policies—including importantly environmental ones—take full account of all costs and benefits, including ones relating to the environment.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he has set a date for decisions on the reform of the PFI; and if he will make a statement. [3763]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The Government will be responding on 23 June to the review of the PFI process by Malcolm Bates.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the Government will publish the report reviewing the private finance initiative. [4135]

Mr. Robinson: The summary and conclusions of the Bates report on PFI will be published in full on 23 June when the Government responds formally to the report. I will arrange to place a copy in the Library.

Halifax Building Society

Liz Blackman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the Building Societies Commission plans to challenge the Halifax Building Society's policy in respect of share payouts to savers with learning difficulties. [2188]

Mrs. Liddell: The Building Societies Commission have no powers to consider the merits of a society's proposals for making shares available to members, when it converts to a plc. That is for the Board and the members to decide. The Commission have already confirmed the transfer of the Halifax Building Society to Halifax plc. A copy of the decision has been placed in the library.

Windfall Tax

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what criteria he will use to assess the liability of companies for the windfall tax. [3316]

Mr. Heald: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the technical issues relating to the operation of the windfall levy upon which he is seeking representations from companies. [3559]

Mr. Norman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what rate of return on its investment for a regulated public utility his Department will deem to be excessive. [3705]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer will announce details of the windfall tax in his Budget statement.

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effects of a windfall tax on pension funds which own shares in utility companies. [3317]

Mr. Robinson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer will be considering a wide range of factors in reaching his view on the windfall tax. He will announce details of the tax in his Budget statement.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what representations he has received from accountancy organisations regarding the proposed windfall tax on privatised utilities; and if he will make a statement; [3676]

(2) what representations he has received from United Kingdom pension funds regarding the proposed windfall tax on privatised utilities; and if he will make a statement. [3675]

Mr. Robinson: Treasury Ministers are treating representations from companies and other bodies as confidential.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions the Treasury has had with the Commission of the European Union regarding the introduction of a United Kingdom windfall tax on the profits of certain privatised utilities. [3677]

Mr. Robinson: There are standard arrangements for making the Commission aware of tax changes introduced in the Budget.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the companies from which he has invited representations on the technical operation of the windfall levy. [3558]

Mr. Robinson: The press notice issued on 13 May invited representations from any company who felt they had an interest in the matter.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library copies of the consultation documents on the operation of the windfall levy. [3560]

Mr. Robinson: No consultation documents have been issued.

Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact on corporate investment plans of the proposed windfall tax. [3742]

Mr. Robinson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer will be considering a wide range of factors in reaching his view on the windfall tax. He is consulting the regulators and will announce details of the tax in his Budget statement.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what calculations the Treasury has made as to the financial impact the proposed windfall tax will have on United Kingdom pension funds. [3683]

Mr. Robinson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer will be considering a wide range of factors in reaching his view on the windfall tax. He will announce details of the tax in his Budget statement.

Share Trading

Ms Abbott: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make inquiries into the reason for the delay in the introduction by the London Stock Exchange of order-driven share trading; and if he will make a statement. [3211]

Mrs. Liddell: The timing of the introduction of order-driven trading in FTSE-100 shares is a matter for the London Stock Exchange subject to the approval of the Securities and Investments Board. I am advised that 20 October remains the Stock Exchange's planned starting date.

Exchange Rate Policy

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the Government's exchange rate policy. [3244]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government wants a stable and competitive pound over the medium term, consistent with its objective of price stability.

Economic Growth

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the growth rate of the British economy, expressed as a percentage rise in non-oil gross domestic product, for 1997. [3238]

Mrs. Liddell: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will provide his forecast of the UK economy when he presents his Budget on 2 July.

Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what meetings he plans to have with the members of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee. [3320]

Mrs. Liddell: The Chancellor has no plans to meet or communicate with the members of the Monetary Policy Committee. The Treasury will be represented at the Committee's meetings in a non-voting capacity.

Privatisation

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list those companies privatised since 1979; and if he will define utility for the purposes of industrial regulation. [3129]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: Table 3.13 of the Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses 1997–98 (HMSO Cm 3601) lists companies privatised since 1979. The Chancellor of the Exchequer will announce details of the windfall levy in his Budget statement on 2 July.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received from small businesses and small business organisations regarding the impact on the economy of a national minimum wage. [3679]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer and his Ministerial colleagues have received a number of representations. He

is keen to have the views of small businesses on this matter. That is why small businesses will be represented on the Low Pay Commission, which will advise the Government on the appropriate level of the minimum wage, taking into account the wider effects on the economy.

EC Finance Ministers

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the recent Council meeting of the Economic and Finance Ministers of the European Union. [3768]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I represented the UK at the Economic and Finance Council—ECOFIN—of the European Union in Luxembourg on 9 June, preceded by a working dinner on 8 June.

I presented my initiative to "Get Europe Back to Work", which proposes a number of measures to increase employment and employability across Europe, including the discussion of national employment programmes by European Finance Ministers. This received a warm welcome from the Council, which noted that employment was a key issue which Europe needed urgently to address and recognised the need for member states to work together to implement practical measures to combat unemployment.

The Council discussed the Stability and Growth Pact the texts of which are to be submitted to the European Council.

Finance Ministers examined a number of design series for common European faces for single currency coins. The final selection of the winning series will be made by Heads of State and Government.

The Council took note of Luxembourg's plans for work in ECOFIN during their forthcoming Presidency of the EU, including taking forward technical aspects of the preparation for stage three of EMU and co-ordination of economic policies.

The series of "structured dialogues" with Ministers of the Central and Eastern European countries continued with a discussion of capital liberalisation reform of the financial sector. It was recognised that these countries still have some way to go to strengthen the structures of their financial sectors.

The Council agreed a draft for a European Council Resolution, to be endorsed at the Amsterdam meeting, establishing a new voluntary exchange-rate mechanism.

The Council reached agreement on texts relating to the legal framework for the euro, subject to outstanding UK Parliamentary Scrutiny reserves.

The Council carried out an examination of Ireland's convergence programme for the period 1997 to 1999. It welcomed the strategy of combining budgetary consolidation, stability-oriented monetary and exchange rate policies and limiting wage growth as the basis for continuing economic growth.

The Council agreed a report on the implementation of the 1996 Broad Economic Policy Guidelines and the draft of the 1997 Guidelines. Both will go forward to the European Council.

The Council discussed a progress report on the Sound and Efficient Management 2000 programme of financial management reform. Further detailed technical work will be taken forward by the Commission.

The Council took note of the Commission's annual report on the Fight Against Fraud programme and gave broad support to its work programme for the coming year. It was noted that the UK felt that levels of fraud against the Community budget were still too high and the Council's attention was drawn to UK proposals in the IGC to help combat fraud.

The Council discussed the extension of a number of derogations from the Mineral Oils Directive, without reaching final agreement.

The Presidency presented its text of the Settlement Finality and Collateral Security Directive, which was acceptable to all member states.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Unemployment

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his assessment of the minimum rate of unemployment for adult men consistent with a high and sustainable rate of growth. [2282]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Claimant unemployment amongst adult men is currently around 1.3 million (8.1 per cent.), 60 per cent. higher than in 1979. However, it is necessary to look at more than just the unemployment of a particular group. The Government's aim is to achieve a high and stable level of employment, by running a successful, low-inflation economy and through policies which improve the operation of the labour market and open up job opportunities to all groups in society—men and women, young and old.

Further Education Colleges

Mr. Richard Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to make further education colleges more accountable to the local communities they serve; and if he will make a statement. [2817]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend has no immediate plans to change the constitutional arrangements for further education colleges.

Low Pay

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make it his policy in advance of the introduction of the national minimum wage to give jobcentre managers discretion to refuse a job advertisement where the wage rate is assessed to be unreasonably low. [2996]

Mr. Alan Howarth: There are no plans to do so in advance of the conclusions of the Low Pay Commission. However, where an employer notifies a jobcentre of a

vacancy offering a rate of pay which appears unduly low, jobcentre staff should advise the employer of the local rates of pay for the job and that their vacancy may be difficult to fill.

Universities (Top-up Fees)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his policy in respect of top-up fees at universities; and if he will make a statement. [3031]

Dr. Howells: We are committed to maximising the opportunity for access to higher education, but will wish to take into account the recommendations of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, which is expected to report next month, before reaching decisions on the future funding of higher education.

Nursery Vouchers

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many nursery vouchers have been issued in the Stroud constituency; what percentage of eligible children have taken up the vouchers; and if a date has yet been agreed for the ending of the voucher scheme. [1097]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 10 June 1997]:* Of the estimated 7,180 children resident in Gloucestershire who are eligible for a nursery education voucher for the summer term, 6,970 (97 per cent.) have been sent vouchers. Information on the parliamentary constituency in which children are resident is not held centrally.

We announced on 22 May that the voucher scheme will finish in England at the end of this term. There will be new arrangements which will lead to a place being secured for every eligible four-year-old with effect from September 1998.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what expenditure savings have been budgeted by the Treasury for *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99 as a result of the Government's proposed abolition of nursery vouchers. [3643]

Mr. Byers: We intend to use the money allocated to the nursery voucher scheme to implement an early years policy which better serves the needs of young children, their parents and the providers of the services they use.

Departmental Staff (Redundancy)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many members of his staff have been made redundant in the last 12 month period *(a)* voluntarily and *(b)* compulsorily; if his Department has retained outplacement consultants to advise staff made redundant; what is the average expenditure per member of staff advised on outplacement; in what circumstances his Department makes payments above the statutory minimum to members of staff made redundant (i) voluntarily and (ii) compulsorily; and if he will make a statement on his policy on such payments. [3131]

Dr. Howells: No members of staff have been made either voluntarily or compulsorily redundant from this Department (including the Employment Service) over the last 12 months. However, during that period 2,089 people have taken voluntary early retirement or voluntary early severance. Outplacement consultants were retained to advise them on starting a new beginning. The average expenditure per member of staff advised was £325.

All payments made to staff were fully in accordance with the Civil Service Compensation Scheme provisions of the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme. Similar provisions would have applied, should staff had been made redundant, in accordance with their terms and conditions of employment.

Education Funding

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 22 May, *Official Report*, column *127*, on education funding, when he expects to complete the review of SSA methodology for 1988–99; and when he expects to publish the conclusions. [3433]

Mr. Byers: I refer the hon. Member to my reply on 11 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *460*, to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster).

Assisted Places Scheme

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment his Department has made of the savings from the abolition of the assisted places scheme and the reduction of primary class sizes to 30 pupils; and in each case what is the overall implication for public expenditure. [3542]

Mr. Byers: The previous Government's published expenditure plans for the assisted places scheme in England for the years 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–00 are £140 million, £160 million and £180 million respectively. The Education (Schools) Bill currently before Parliament provides for no new assisted places to be awarded after the start of academic year 1997–98 and savings will therefore begin to accrue in financial year 1998–99. The Government's spending plans for 1998–99 onwards will be announced in due course and will take account of the savings progressively released from phasing out the scheme. Those savings will amount to about £100 million in total by the year 2000. We will be discussing with LEAs and others the implementation of our policy on class sizes following publication of the forthcoming White Paper on education.

Nursery Education

Mrs. Gillian Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his reply policy document on nursery education, on what criteria the calculation of £366 per term per four-year-old place has been based. [3981]

Mr. Byers: The level of nursery education grant per four-year-old for the autumn 1997 and spring 1998 terms

corresponds to the value of a termly voucher under the nursery education voucher scheme.

Ofsted Reports

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidelines *(a)* his Department and *(b)* Ofsted have issued on the tone, style and content of Ofsted reports; and if he will make a statement. [3805]

Mr. Byers: The Department has issued no such guidelines. This is a matter for the Office for Standards in Education. I have asked the Chief Inspector to write to the hon. Member.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Obscene Publications (Prosecutions)

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Attorney-General what guidance is issued to Crown Prosecutors considering prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act 1959. [3395]

The Attorney-General: The decision whether to prosecute under the 1959 Act is taken in accordance with evidential and public interest criteria set out in the Code for Crown Prosecutors which is issued under section 10 of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985. Those criteria govern all categories of case.

In deciding whether the evidence is sufficient to justify proceedings in a particular case, consideration will be given to the statutory definition of obscenity and the manner in which is has been applied by the courts in cases involving comparable material. Where proceeding may be appropriate a representative sample of the material is submitted to Central Casework at Crown Prosecution Service Headquarters where it is assessed by experienced staff to ensure a consistent approach. The Director of Public Prosecutions does not publish the detailed operational guidance given in relation to particular categories of offence.

In determining whether a prosecution would be in the public interest, the principal factors include:

- the degree and type of obscenity together with the form in which it is presented;
- the type and scale of any commercial venture;
- whether publication was made to a child or the possibility that such publication would be likely to take place.

The above is not however an exhaustive list of relevant factors.

SCOTLAND

Student Loans

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the average amount owed by further education *(a)* students and *(b)* mature students in Scotland to (i) the Student Loans Company and (ii) personal banks as a result of and at the end of their period of study, broken down into local authority areas; and if he will make a statement. [2745]

Mr. Wilson: The amount owed to the Student Loans Company Limited is an operational matter for the Company.

I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member, although the information may not be available in the precise format requested.

Information is not held centrally on the extent of borrowing from personal banks.

Land Laws and the Feudal System

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to bring forward proposals to reform the Scottish land laws and the feudal system. [2472]

Mr. McLeish: The Scottish Law Commission has been asked to consider the law on leasehold casualties and has published a discussion paper. It aims to report by March 1998. The Commission will also issue a report on the law of the tenement later this year, and expects to make recommendations and issue its report on the abolition of the feudal system by the end of 1999. It will consider wider aspects of the law of leasehold tenure thereafter. We will consider the options for legislation in these areas as soon as possible after the Commission's reports are received.

Unemployment

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to tackle unemployment, especially youth unemployment, in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [2726]

Mr. Wilson: The Government attach a high priority to helping unemployed people into work. Under our initiative Welfare to Work we intend to help young people aged 18 to 24 who have been unemployed for over six months move off benefit and into work. There will also be help for people over the age of 25 who have been unemployed for two years or more.

Mature Students

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of *(a)* how many and *(b)* what percentage of mature students studying for (i) undergraduate degrees and (ii) equivalent vocational qualifications in Scotland currently (1) are entitled to and (2) claim grants for (A) teaching fees and (B) maintenance, broken down into local authority areas; and if he will make a statement. [2743]

Mr. Wilson: The information is not available in the form requested.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of *(a)* how many and *(b)* what percentage of those studying for (i) undergraduate degrees and (ii) equivalent vocational qualifications in Scotland are mature students; and if he will make a statement. [2742]

Mr. Wilson: There are no direct equivalences between undergraduate degrees and vocational qualifications. An undergraduate degree (incorporating first degrees, HNDs, HNCs and other Advanced non-postgraduate activity in FE institutions) is approximately equivalent to SVQ levels 4 and 5. The available data are set out in the table.

Students studying for undergraduate courses in Scotland: 1996–97 (provisional)

	Higher Education Institutions[1]			*Further Education Institutions*[2]			*Total*		
	Mature[3] *students*	*Total students*	*Percentage mature*[4]	*Mature*[3] *students*	*Total students*	*Percentage mature*[4]	*Mature*[3] *students*	*Total students*	*Percentage mature*[4]
Other undergraduates	61,797	119,861	52	35,675	54,584	65	97,472	174,445	56
SVQ Level 4	56	56	100	220	292	75	276	348	79
SVQ Level 5	0	0	—	31	106	29	31	106	29
All undergraduates	61,853	119,917	52	35,926	54,982	65	97,779	174,899	56

[1] Provisional DATA: Source HESA 1996–97 December record.
[2] Provisional DATA: Source FES 1996–97 Autumn data.
[3] Missing ages are excluded from analysis.
[4] Mature students are aged 21 and over.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the average maintenance *(a)* grant and *(b)* loan awarded to mature students in Scotland in each year of study; and if he will make a statement. [2744]

Mr. Wilson: The information available on student awards does not enable us to identify separately the amounts actually received by mature students as a group. It will vary according to individual circumstances.

Information on the average student loan is not available in the form requested, but the average loan made to students aged 26 or over studying in Scotland in academic year 1995–96 was £1090.

Ferry Services

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much subsidy was paid to Caledonian MacBrayne ferry services to *(a)* Dunoon, *(b)* Rothesay and *(c)* Rhubodach in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement on the disparity of fares between Caledonian MacBrayne ferry services to Dunoon and the Island of Bute. [2854]

Mr. Chisholm: The Government pay subsidy to Caledonian MacBrayne on its total operating loss rather than on individual routes. Although an aggregate revenue target is set as part of that process, the setting of fares on individual routes is a matter for the commercial judgment of the company. I will ask the chairman of Caledonian MacBrayne to write to the hon. Member about fares on the Gourock-Dunoon and Wemyss Bay-Rothesay routes.

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he has offered Caledonian MacBrayne an opportunity to tender for the passenger service franchise on the ferry services to Orkney and Shetland; and if he will make a statement. [2842]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 11 June 1997]:* Ministers are currently considering the report of Scottish Office officials on the evaluation of tenders submitted in the competitive tendering process for the Northern Isles passenger ferry services contract, and will decide in the light of the tenders received whether to conclude now a contractual agreement with one of the ferry operators who have submitted tenders or whether to re-open the tendering process.

Schools (Internet)

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with BT concerning proposals to link Scotland's schools to the Internet; which areas of Scotland he assesses will be linked to the Internet; what form it is anticipated any link will take; if the link will be through ISDN or digital connection; what is the expected cost per pupil of the proposed link; and if he will make a statement. [3184]

Mr. Wilson: The Government are discussing with BT how they can best fulfil their commitment to link Scotland's schools to the information superhighway. The details of these plans, including the capacity of the link, are not yet finalised.

Cable companies already provide a free link to schools passed by their networks. They offer schools a competitive flat monthly fee for unlimited internet access. Additionally, ISDN or equivalent high speed connection is available also at competitive rates. An estimated 45–50 per cent. of Scottish schools could benefit from this service by the turn of the century when cabling in current franchise areas is completed.

Loch Lomond National Park

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to create a Loch Lomond national park; and if he will make a statement. [3260]

Mr. Chisholm: We are committed to put in place a proper system for the management of our areas of outstanding beauty, of which Loch Lomond is a prime example, which is both tailored to Scottish circumstances and consistent with the highest international standards. The Loch Lomond and the Trossachs Steering Committee consulted earlier this year on future management arrangements for the area. My noble Friend the Minister for Agriculture, the Environment and Fisheries in Scotland is to meet representatives from the Steering Committee to discuss their proposals for the establishment of a Joint Committee. We are also currently considering the many responses received to the Discussion Paper issued at the end of last year, following the Review of Natural Heritage Designations, before reaching decisions on the need for changes to the present system, such as the introduction of National Parks in Scotland.

Television Masts

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to review planning procedures as they relate to the erection of television masts under 15 feet in height; and if he will make a statement. [3455]

Mr. Chisholm: My right hon. Friend has no plans to review planning procedures relating to television masts. All television masts, regardless of their height, require full planning consent. The Scottish Office is, however, reviewing planning controls over telecommunications masts under 15m in height, which benefit from permitted development rights. If any proposals to change planning legislation result from this review, a consultation paper will be issued.

Departmental Documents

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what percentage and how many documents in 1996 he estimates were *(a)* passed on to the Public Record Office intact, *(b)* passed on to the Public Record Office in censored form, *(c)* retained by his Department in full, *(d)* retained by his Department in part, *(e)* destroyed, *(f)* otherwise disposed of, and *(g)* otherwise unaccounted for. [2515]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 11 June 1997]:* The records of my Department are specifically exempted from the Public Records Act 1958, and therefore are not passed to the Public Records Office. However similar procedures apply to the transfer of records to the Scottish Record Office (SRO). The procedures oblige my Department to ensure that all documentary records are properly preserved with a view to possible selection and transfer to the SRO and eventual release to the public. Statistics relating to records retained and passed to the SRO are not available in the precise categories requested; however for 1996–97 the numbers of files by broad category are as follows:

Records processed: 54,131

Question	*Category*	*Number*	*Per cent.*
(a)	Intact Records to Scottish Record Office	2,209	4.1
(b)	Censored Records to Scottish Record Office	0	0
(c)	Full Records retained by the Scottish Office	3,224	5.9
(d)	Part Records retained by the Scottish Office	0	0
(e)	Records destroyed by the Scottish Office	48,698	90
(f)	Records otherwise disposed of	0	0
(g)	Records unaccounted for	0	0

Public Service Task Force

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what arrangements he has made for representation of local authorities in the islands areas on the task force established to develop a best value system in the delivery of local public services; and if he will make a statement. [2841]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 11 June 1997]:* Local authority representation on the task force is a matter for the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA).

Breast Cancer

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many women in Inverclyde have been diagnosed as suffering from breast cancer and have been treated for this complaint in each of the past five years; and if he will make a statement. [2766]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 12 June 1997]:* The number of registrations for breast cancer among Inverclyde residents and the number of discharges of women with breast cancer for the period 1991–95 are as follows:

Inverclyde residents

Year	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Number of registrations	62	67	37	25	79
Number of discharges	145	128	81	73	143

The registration figures for 1995 are provisional. The figures for discharges relate to all Inverclyde residents with a primary diagnosis of malignant neoplasm of the breast. Discharges include inpatient and day cases. There may be more than one discharge per woman.

The annual changes over the last five years in the number of registrations and discharges among Inverclyde women with breast cancer may reflect the timing of the screening programme. The mobile unit of the Scottish Breast Screening Programme visited the Inverclyde catchment area from January 1992 until October/November 1992. It then visited the Inverclyde catchment area again in November/December 1994. This may explain the fall in registrations and discharges in 1993 and 1994 and their rise in 1995.

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the specialist breast cancer units in *(a)* Strathclyde and *(b)* Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [2767]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 12 June 1997]:* The Macmillan Directory of Breast Cancer Services lists the following Breast Cancer Units in Strathclyde:

Victoria Infirmary, Glasgow
The Western Infirmary, Glasgow
Glasgow Royal Infirmary
Southern General Hospital
Inverclyde Royal Hospital
Royal Alexandra Hospital
Hairmyres Hospital
Law Hospital
Monklands Hospital
Crosshouse Hospital
Ayr Hospital.

The Macmillan Directory also lists the following Breast Cancer Units in other areas of Scotland:

Perth Royal Infirmary
Stirling Royal Infirmary
Falkirk Royal Infirmary
St. John's Hospital at Howden
Raigmore Hospital
Western General Hospital

Dumfries and Galloway Royal Infirmary

Victoria Hospital, Kirkcaldy

Queen Margaret Hospital

Aberdeen Royal Infirmary

Borders General Hospital

Ninewells Hospitals.

In recent years there has been a significant trend towards increased specialisation in the provision of care and treatment for patients with cancer, including breast cancer. Following publication in 1996 of the report on Commissioning Cancer Services in Scotland, Health Boards and Trusts were asked to review their cancer services, and to prepare plans for improving services to ensure that all patients have access to high quality care. The plans which Health Boards have developed in collaboration with NHS Trusts should ensure continuing improvements in the high standards of care already available throughout Scotland to patients with breast cancer.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Clean Coal Initiative

Mr. Dafis: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to review the level of effectiveness of the clean coal initiative proposed by the previous Administration; and if she will make a statement. [3017]

Mr. Battle: An evaluation of the clean coal programme took place only last year and the evaluation report published in July 1996. The evaluation by an international panel of experts and involving UK industry and universities showed that the programme has been a significant value to industry by acting as a focus for collaboration and contributing to the development of the technology for both the home and export markets. The present phase of the programme is due to be completed next year and we are currently reviewing in consultation with industry, what further work may need to be undertaken. This review will take into account both the recommendations in the evaluation report and the views of the industry led Foresight Task Force on clean coal power generation.

Over the coming months the Government will be considering the balance of activities within the spending plans it inherited to ensure that they reflect the Government's priorities. The results of our review of the UK's future clean coal technology requirements will be fed into this wider exercise. Copies of the evaluation report for the clean coal programme are in the Libraries of the House.

Plastic Baton Rounds

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the amount and type of 37/38 mm plastic baton rounds licensed for export to Indonesia, in each year since 1990. [1846]

Mrs. Roche: There is no record that any such export licences have been issued since 1990.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Gummer: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what specific measure her Department proposes to achieve the Government's target for the reduction in CO_2 emissions by 20 per cent. from 1990 levels by 2010. [3156]

Mr. Battle: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on 12 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *516*.

Mr. Gummer: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what proportion of the UK reduction in CO_2 emissions by 20 per cent. on 1990 levels by 2010 she estimates will be contributed by industry; [3155]

(2) what reduction in CO_2 emissions she estimates British industry will make by *(a)* 2005 and *(b)* 2010. [3154]

Mr. Battle: We are currently reviewing the United Kingdom's Climate Change programme looking at policies and measures across all sectors. At present it is not possible to estimate what contribution each sector will contribute to the overall programme.

EU and Government Grants

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action she will take to regulate services to business provided by consultants in the private sector on the issue of United Kingdom Government grant availability relating to the European Union. [3269]

Mrs. Roche: My Department is aware of cases of unscrupulous practice by a small number of companies—so called "grant cowboys"—who trade in grant availability advice to businesses. My advice to firms approached by such companies is to talk to their Business Links, who are a local and reliable source of advice on the full range of business support that is available both from the EU and other sources.

We will continue to keep the matter under review.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what proposals she has to reform the current structure of local, regional and national business advisory services dealing with European Union and United Kingdom Government grant support. [3271]

Mrs. Roche: My Department will work with existing business support organisations, and with the proposed Regional Development Agencies, to strengthen the quality of all business support services.

Sellafield

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when MOX fuel fabrication is due to commence at the new Sellafield MOX plant. [3135]

Mr. Battle: The precise timing for commissioning of the new Sellafield Mixed Oxide (MOX) plant is an operational matter for the company, subject to meeting regulatory requirements. However, I understand that the MOX plant is expected to commence operations sometime in 1998.

Dr. Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if the Sellafield MOX plant will be set up to handle weapon-grade plutonium. [3136]

Mr. Battle: The Sellafield MOX Plant (SMP) has been designed to handle civil plutonium. I understand that BNFL currently has no plans for the plant to handle ex-military plutonium.

G7 countries have already recognised that, in the context of disposing of surplus fissile military materials, incorporating the plutonium into MOX fuels—and subsequently irradiating it—is an important means of safeguarding the material. No decision has yet been made whether to convert surplus plutonium taken from nuclear weapons in the USA and former Soviet Union into MOX fuel and burn in conventional reactors.

Dr. Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if routine checking will take place of the weight and isotopic composition of the feed material the Sellafield MOX plant receives. [3137]

Mr. Battle: The Sellafield MOX plant is subject to international safeguards arrangements which require the reporting of the weight and isotopic composition of plutonium feed to the plant.

Environmental Technology

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what measures she has taken to assist the United Kingdom environmental technology industry; if she will make a statement. [3582]

Mr. Battle: The Government recognise the importance of the environmental industry and will be exploring with its members how we can best work together to support it. We have already made financial help available under the Sector Challenge to a project aimed at helping companies in the technology and services sub-sector to export.

Energy Production

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the *(a)* desirability and *(b)* feasibility of internalising the environmental and societal externalities of energy production. [3009]

Mr. Battle: The Government share with other member countries of the International Energy Agency the goal that, to the extent necessary and practicable, the environment costs of energy production and use should be reflected in prices. The Government are also concerned about the social implications of changing patterns of energy production, though they believe that there are better ways of responding to such concerns than distorting market prices.

Business Links

Mr. Cotter: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many business links have been created since 1993. [3954]

Mrs. Roche: There are 89 Business Link partnerships and 241 separate Business Link outlets.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the future of business links. [3953]

Mrs. Roche: Improving the Business Links service to small and medium sized businesses is one of my key priorities. I am committed to ensuring that all Business Links deliver a service which is of the highest quality. Many are already doing so, and I am discussing with officials and with the national Business Links partners how we can ensure that all Business Links are brought up to the standard of the best.

Telecommunications

Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she intends to meet the Internet Service Providers Association and the Cable Communications Association to discuss competition aspects of the Government's discussions with British Telecom. [3712]

Mr. Battle: I and my ministerial colleagues engage in many meetings with the full range of players in the industry. Following a special package for schools earlier this year from the cable sector, BT have recently brought forward their own first proposals for the connection of schools to the Internet. The Director General, OFTEL, has announced plans to consult widely, and as quickly as possible, on these proposals. This consultation will include the Internet service providers and the cable companies.

Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) when her Department intends to publish proposals for a reform of the regulatory structure for telecommunications and broadcasting; [1566]

(2) if her Department will continue to have both responsibilities for the communication and information industries. [1567]

(3) if her Department will continue to be responsible for all aspects of conditional access for digital television. [1568]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 3 June 1997]:* The development and application of digital technology is steadily undermining the distinctions between the previously separate sectors of telecommunications, broadcasting, and IT, and is creating new opportunities, for example in multimedia and interactive services. This is enabling the development of the "Information Society".

It is clear that, in the medium term, a new regulatory regime will be required to reflect these developments. For example, the Government have made clear their intent to create an Office of Communications (Ofcom), which would regulate the communications infrastructure and ensure fair competition. My Department will take a central role in work on this, and other possible changes, by virtue of our objective of promoting the interests of UK business and consumers; encompassing not only those sectors which supply, but also sectors which use the Information Society technologies and services, and the regulation of consumer protection, competition, and the communications sectors.

This work is however at an early stage, and it is important not to attempt to pre-empt technological developments. Departmental responsibilities are, of course, a matter for the Prime Minister.

Energy Programme

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will give a breakdown of the expenditure on promotion for the energy programme for *(a)* 1995–96, *(b)* 1996–97 and *(c)* 1997–98. [1006]

Mr. Battle: Net expenditure on promotion within the energy programmes was approximately £3.5 million in 1995–96 and £2.7 million in 1996–97. Current plans for 1997–98 are approximately £3.2 million. The expenditure relates to new and renewable and clean coal technology and the oil and gas supplies industries.

The current plans will be included in the Comprehensive Spending Review, announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 11 June 1997, under which the Government will be considering the balance of activities within the spending plans it inherited to ensure that they reflect the Government's priorities.

The promotion budget handled by the Oil, Gas and Petrochemicals Supplies Office (OSO), which was £1.2 million in 1995–96 and £0.97 million in 1996–97 with current plans for 1997–98 of £1.5 million, is primarily used for export promotion on trade fairs, missions and seminars in the oil and gas supplies industries. The expenditure within the new and renewable and clean coal areas, which was £2.3 million in 1995–96 and £1.7 million in 1996–97 with current plans for 1997–98 of £1.7 million, is on technology transfer activities including commercialisation, export promotion and disseminating information to industry in publications, seminars and workshops.

WALES

Devolution Referendum

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to the speech made by the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) to the Institute for Public Policy Research in Cardiff, what evidence there is to support his contention that the Welsh economy will be badly hit and thousands of jobs will disappear in the absence of a yes vote in the referendum. [2535]

Mr. Ron Davies: The global market for inward investment on which Wales relies so heavily is becoming intensely competitive. Ten years ago there were only three Development Agencies actively operating in Japan; today there are 88 from Europe alone. In this climate, the economic development of Wales needs the clear leadership and dedicated attention to local priorities that can best be provided by an elected Assembly.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what proportion of the Wales Arts Council funding for the visual arts is devoted to promoting the work of artists working and living in Wales; [3015]

(2) what steps the Wales Arts Council is taking to ensure that galleries in Wales exhibit the works of artists living and working in the locality in which galleries are located. [3016]

Mr. Ron Davies: These are operational matters for the Arts Council and I will ask the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member with the information requested. A copy of this letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Sarn-y-Bryn Caled Road Junction

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on plans for the redevelopment of Sarn-y-Bryn Caled road junction, Welshpool, indicating the timetable for redevelopment; and if he will ensure that 40 miles per hour speed limits are implemented until any permanent safety changes are made. [3224]

Mr. Hain: The provision of a roundabout at the Sarn-y-Bryn Caled junction is included in the current Welsh Office roads programme. Work is anticipated to start in spring 1998 subject to the satisfactory completion of statutory procedures, acquisition of land and availability of finance. As an interim measure the Department has already taken steps to implement a 40 mph speed limit together with other measures to improve safety at this junction.

Assisted Places Scheme

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what estimate he has made of the amount of public money spent on the assisted places scheme since its inception; [3596]

(2) how many assisted places there are in each of the private schools of Wales. [3595]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on Wednesday 11 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *487*.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the amount of public money that must be provided to the assisted places scheme up to the cessation of the scheme; and if he will make a statement. [3597]

Mr. Hain: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the Education (Schools) Bill, the assisted places scheme will be phased-out over a period of 7 years. The total cost of the scheme over that time is estimated at around £20 million.

Pupil-teacher Ratios

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the pupil to teacher ratio in *(a)* infant and *(b)* primary schools in (i) 1979 and (ii) 1996; and if he will make a statement. [3598]

Mr. Hain: The information requested is shown in the following table:

Pupil teacher ratios, by type of LEA maintained primary school

Type of LEA maintained primary school:	*Pupil teacher ratios*[1]	
	1979	*1996*
Infant	22.1	22.8
Junior with infant	21.4	22.4
Junior without infant	22.8	22.7
All primary	22.0	22.5

Note:

[1] The ratio, at January each year, of the total number of full-time equivalent pupils to the total number of full-time equivalent teachers within the schools.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list by cattle breed the number of cattle clinically confirmed as having BSE in the United Kingdom for each year since 1985, together with an estimate of the total number of resident cattle of each of these breeds within the United Kingdom in each year, indicating the percentage that the number of confirmed cases represents for each breed of cattle. [3568]

Mr. Rooker: The number of cattle confirmed as having BSE in the United Kingdom in each year from 1985 are listed by cattle breed in the table:

Breed	*1986*	*1987*	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*'1997*
Aberdeen Angus	0	0	0	1	5	17	38	51	24	16	7	0
Aberdeen Angus ×	0	0	3	7	19	46	127	164	140	63	39	6
Aberdeen Angus × Ayrshire	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	2	3	0	0	0
Aberdeen Angus × Charolais	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	1
Aberdeen Angus × Friesian	0	0	4	14	28	76	172	184	89	52	24	2
Aberdeen Angus × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Aberdeen Angus × Jersey	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	5	1	0	0	0
Aberdeen Angus × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	6	2	7	1	0
Aberdeen Angus × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Aberdeen Angus × Sussex	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Ankole	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Ayr × Charolais	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire	0	8	31	93	195	274	381	314	209	96	64	3
Ayrshire ×	0	1	3	8	1	7	1	5	3	1	1	0
Ayrshire × Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Blonde D'Aquitaine	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Galloway	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Gelbvieh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	5	2	1	1	0
Ayrshire × Red Friesian	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	2	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Simmenthal	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	1	0	1	0	0
Ayrshire × Sussex	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Welsh Black	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Bazadaise	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	4	6	17	27	19	6	5	0
Belgian Blue ×	0	0	0	0	1	3	22	22	25	17	10	1
Belgian Blue × Aberdeen Angus	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
Belgian Blue × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	0
Belgian Blue × Holstein	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	2	0	0	0
Belgian Blue × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Belted Galloway	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Black Hereford ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	1	0
Black Limousin ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine	0	0	0	1	5	2	11	9	15	8	10	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	4	11	4	1
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Charolais	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Friesian	0	0	0	0	1	6	17	17	10	5	3	2
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Lincoln Red	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Blue Grey	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4	1	1	1	0
Blue Grey ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
Blue Roan	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
British Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
British White	0	0	0	0	8	27	4	2	1	1	0	1
British White × Aberdeen Angus	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
British White × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	2	1	0
British White × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Brown Swiss	0	0	2	1	2	5	4	6	4	0	9	1
Brown Swiss ×	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	4	2	0
Brown Swiss × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	8	6	9	6

Breed	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Brown Swiss × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Brown Swiss × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Brown Swiss × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Brown Swiss × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Canadian Angus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Canadian Angus × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Canadian Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Charolais	0	0	2	11	17	41	103	116	66	54	18	5
Charolais ×	0	0	0	6	7	31	69	102	72	51	23	2
Charolais × Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Charolais × Friesian	0	0	0	0	4	27	54	47	33	16	10	1
Charolais × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	3	0	0	0
Charolais × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	0	0	0
Charolais × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Charolais × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	4	1	0	0	0
Charolais × Murray Grey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0
Charolais × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	2	0	0
Charolais × South Devon	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	0
Chianin × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Chianina ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Chianina × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Devon	0	0	0	0	5	3	4	10	5	3	2	0
Devon ×	0	0	0	0	1	5	11	4	3	2	0	0
Devon × Blonde D'Aquitaine	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Devon × Friesian	0	1	0	1	6	3	16	19	14	9	3	0
Devon × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	1	0	0	0
Dutch Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Friesian	3	86	2,089	6,008	11,615	21,065	29,572	26,676	18,632	10,958	6,054	893
Friesian ×	0	0	0	0	11	40	98	96	48	25	15	2
Friesian × Ayrshire	0	0	0	2	6	15	22	22	16	6	2	1
Friesian × Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	1	11	41	39	27	19	11	1
Friesian × Blue Grey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Friesian × Galloway	0	0	0	0	1	1	5	4	1	0	0	0
Friesian × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	1	5	6	5	5	3	0	0
Friesian × Holstein	0	16	127	204	388	637	999	1,231	1,179	816	490	99
Friesian × Longhorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Friesian × Normandy	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Friesian × Red Poll	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Friesian × South Devon	0	0	0	0	3	5	8	7	5	0	0	1
Galloway	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	4	1	1	1	0
Galloway ×	0	0	0	2	0	0	5	0	0	1	0	0
Galloway × Aberdeen Angus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0
Galloway × Devon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Galloway × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Galloway × Saler	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Galloway × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0
Galloway × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Gelbvieh	0	0	0	1	1	2	3	9	1	0	3	0
Gelbvieh ×	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	1	0	0	0	0
Gelbvieh × Charolais	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Gelbvieh × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	5	1	0	1	0
Gelbvieh × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Gloucester	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gloucester ×	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Guernsey	0	2	19	64	146	221	332	302	198	123	68	8
Guernsey ×	0	0	3	1	1	1	2	5	5	1	1	0
Guernsey × Devon	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Guernsey × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	4	0	1
Guernsey × Merse Rhine Issel	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Guernsey × Murray Gray	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Guernsey × Red Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Guernsey × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
Hereford	0	0	1	24	44	82	138	144	100	60	23	4
Hereford ×	0	0	9	65	141	362	727	830	574	386	195	30
Hereford × Aberdeen Angus	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	0
Hereford × Ayrshire	0	0	0	0	1	1	4	3	2	1	3	0
Hereford × Devon	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Hereford × Friesian	0	4	21	106	242	571	1,150	1,370	755	433	212	29
Hereford × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	0
Hereford × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Hereford × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	3	1	0	0
Hereford × Red Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	3	1	0	0	0
Hereford × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	0	0
Hereford × Simmental	0	0	0	0	2	1	8	10	7	4	4	1
Hereford × South Devon	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Highland	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	4	4	3	2	0
Highland ×	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Highland × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

Breed	*1986*	*1987*	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Holstein	0	2	62	147	272	475	475	399	267	164	113	27
Holstein ×	0	0	0	0	8	42	128	103	87	22	13	1
Holstein × Ayrshire	0	0	0	0	1	2	4	3	1	0	0	0
Holstein × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Jersey	0	0	19	60	135	210	323	290	230	114	68	12
Jersey ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	4	2	0	1	1
Jersey × Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0
Jersey × Charolais	0	0	1	0	1	3	2	0	1	2	0	0
Jersey × Devon	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Jersey × Friesian	0	1	3	2	4	10	11	4	9	5	2	2
Jersey × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
Jersey × Welsh Black	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Limousin	0	0	1	10	13	46	96	114	88	56	39	4
Limousin ×	0	0	0	0	28	87	217	335	221	159	94	19
Limousin × Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
Limousin × British White	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Limousin × Friesian	0	0	2	12	32	92	246	308	183	123	44	8
Limousin × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	5	0	1	0	0
Limousin × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	3	4	5	6	1	3	0
Limousin × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	3	1	0	0	0
Limousin × Jersey	0	0	0	0	2	4	6	3	2	1	1	0
Limousin × Luing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Limousin × North Devon	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Limousin × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	0	1	0
Lincoln Red	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	3	1	1	0
Lincoln Red ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0
Longhorn	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	2	2	1	1	1
Luing ×	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Luing × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Marchigiana	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Meuse Rhine Issel	0	0	0	1	1	3	5	2	2	2	1	1
Meuse Rhine Issel ×	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	0
Meuse Rhine Issel × Ayrshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Meuse Rhine Issel × Friesian	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	0	1	0	3	0
Meuse Rhine Issel × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Murray Grey	0	0	0	0	1	7	4	8	6	3	1	0
Murray Grey ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	4	4	1	1	0
Murray Grey × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	2	3	0	0	1
Murray Grey × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
Murray Grey × South Devon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Normandy ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Normandy × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
North Devon	0	0	0	0	2	5	2	5	0	0	0	0
North Devon ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
North Deveon × Friesian	0	0	0	2	1	5	8	9	1	4	2	0
North Devon × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Not Recorded	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Piedmontese	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	1	2	0
Piedmontese ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0
Piedmontese × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Red Friesian	0	0	2	8	28	50	72	45	48	20	9	2
Red Friesian × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Red Fr ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Red Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	2	1	0	0	0
Red Holstein × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Red Poll	0	0	0	1	4	2	6	6	11	2	5	1
Red Poll ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Red Poll × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Red Poll × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Romagnola	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Romagnola × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Romagnola × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Saler	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	0	0
Saler ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0
Shetland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Shorthorn	0	2	2	20	8	21	44	67	47	23	16	0
Shorthorn ×	0	0	2	2	3	7	14	11	13	5	3	0
Shorthorn × Blue Grey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Shorthorn × Friesian	0	0	0	0	4	9	12	11	4	3	4	0
Shorthorn × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shorthorn × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Shorthorn × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
Shorthorn × Merse Rhine Issel	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shorthorn × Red Friesian	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Shorthorn × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0
Simmental	0	0	2	11	16	52	123	150	111	71	32	6
Simmental ×	0	0	0	0	15	72	213	299	195	144	95	12
Simmental × Angus	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0

Breed	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Simmental × Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Simmental × Friesian	0	1	2	8	28	69	239	242	166	106	50	6
Simmental × Galloway	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Simmental × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	0	0	2	0
Simmental × Highland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Simmental × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	2
Simmental × Lincoln Red	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Simmental × Luing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0
South Devon	0	0	2	4	4	14	20	33	19	5	8	0
South Devon × Aberdeen Angus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
South Devon × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
South Devon × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
South Devon ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	6	2	2	0	0
South Down	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Sussex	0	0	1	1	5	2	4	16	9	4	6	0
Sussex ×	0	0	0	0	2	5	7	3	8	0	1	1
Sussex × Devon	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Sussex × Friesian	0	0	0	1	5	5	7	14	16	12	3	1
Sussex × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
Sussex × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Welsh Black	0	0	1	4	1	4	8	19	11	5	1	0
Welsh Black ×	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	2	7	2	0	1
Welsh Black × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	1	2	1	0
Welsh Black × Hereford	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Welsh Black × Limousin	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	0	0	1	0
White Park	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Unknown	1	194	76	271	599	291	370	296	217	148	138	39
Total	4	318	2,493	7,193	14,160	25,244	36,989	34,828	24,394	14,537	8,114	1,255

[1] 1997 Figures for GB to 11 June 1997. 1997 figures for NI to 6 June 1997.

My Department does not hold data on the numbers of resident cattle by breed.

Food Labelling

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to end the use of misleading nutritional information on food labels. [3514]

Mr. Rooker: Detailed rules governing the provision of nutrition information on food labels are contained in the Food Labelling Regulations 1996. This information is also subject to the overriding requirements of section 15 of the Food Safety Act 1990 which makes it an offence to label a food falsely or in such a way as to mislead consumers.

Responsibility for enforcing these rules rests with local authority trading standards officers, who are being reminded of the need to check compliance in this area.

Organophosphates

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which Minister in his Department is responsible for matters relating to organophosphates. [3390]

Dr. John Cunningham: Issues relating to organophosphates within my Department relate to their use in pesticides and veterinary medicines. These fall within the portfolio of my hon. Friend the Minister of State. However, I have overall responsibility for all departmental issues and am taking an active interest in this topic.

Beef Farmers

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what new measures he proposes to support beef farmers whose livelihoods are under threat. [3399]

Mr. Rooker: Considerable amounts of money have been allocated to help relieve some of the financial pressures facing the industry. Significant sums are also currently being spent on the calf processing scheme and expanded intervention arrangements. In the circumstances we do not currently envisage additional payments to producers to compensate for the current low level of prices.

Smuggled Animals

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many animals have been detected being smuggled into the country in each year since 1974. [3458]

Dr. John Cunningham: The information is not available in the form requested. The number of dogs, cats and other rabies susceptible mammals known to have been illegally landed in Great Britain in each year since 1974 is as follows:

	Dogs	Cats	Other rabies susceptible mammals
1975	143	38	20 incidents involving 563 animals
1976	118	45	42 incidents involving 138 animals
1977	60	17	13 incidents involving 115 animals
1978	57	27	17 incidents involving 35 animals
1979	70	39	25 incidents involving 452 animals
1980	51	34	18 incidents involving 277 animals
1981	56	22	23 incidents involving 88 animals
1982	45	30	15 incidents involving 43 animals
1983	56	36	16 incidents involving 17 animals
1984	28	30	11 incidents involving 14 animals
1985	44	37	21 incidents involving 109 animals
1986	50	27	18 incidents involving 34 animals
1987	26	25	17 incidents involving 92 animals
1988	93	16	16 incidents involving 75 animals
1989	38	28	13 incidents involving 93 animals
1990	59	40	12 incidents involving 92 animals
1991	72	39	16 incidents involving 23 animals
1992	60	33	11 incidents involving 46 animals

	Dogs	Cats	Other rabies susceptible mammals
1993	50	39	13 incidents involving 56 animals
1994	70	39	7 incidents involving 14 animals
1995	59	44	8 incidents involving 13 animals
1996	60	20	14 incidents involving 14 animals

In respect of farm livestock and horses the information is not available for the earlier part of the period in question and could be obtained only for the later part at disproportionate cost. But we believe the number which could be classified as smuggled is extremely small.

British Beef (Export Ban)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what new proposals he has to remove the ban on exports of British beef. [3397]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, gave to the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir Teddy Taylor) on 12 June, *Official Report*, column *1279–87*.

Beef Imports

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his Department's policy towards imports of beef to the United Kingdom from *(a)* the European Union and *(b)* elsewhere. [3398]

Mr. Rooker: All fresh meat imported into the United Kingdom, whether from the European Union or elsewhere, must be produced in accordance with harmonised hygiene rules laid down in Council Directive 64/433/EEC (as amended). Also, imported meat derived from bovines which, at the time of slaughter, were more than 30 months old is prohibited under the Fresh Meat (Beef Controls) (No 2) Regulations 1996 unless it comes from animals covered by the Beef Assurance Scheme, or born, reared and slaughtered in those third countries specifically excluded by the Regulations where there is no known risk of BSE.

On 5 June, following advice from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food announced (*Official Report* column 227) the opening of consultations on legislation which would extend to imported beef (other than from those countries exempted from the Fresh Meat (Beef Controls) (No 2) Regulations 1996 our current domestic controls on specified bovine material (SBM).

The proposed extension of these controls does not amount to an import ban.

Subject to the outcome of the consultation, we intend to proceed in late July if agreement to introduce similar Community-wide controls (which would also apply to imports from third countries) is not forthcoming by then.

Quarantine

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many animals detained in quarantine have been identified as rabies positive in each year since 1974; and what was their country of origin. [3457]

Dr. John Cunningham: In 1983, rabies was confirmed in an Irish Wolfhound imported from the USA which died in quarantine. There were no cases in the other years.

Mr. Kennedy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many animals detained in quarantine have been put down in each year since 1974; and what was their country of origin. [3459]

Dr. Cunningham: The information is not available in the form requested. The number of cats, dogs and other rabies susceptible mammals that died during their detention in quarantine in Great Britain for the period 1975–1996 is as follows:

	Dogs	Cats	Other animals
1975	79	52	3
1976	71	65	2
1977	72	52	2
1978	70	52	21
1979	82	62	16
1980	68	44	6
1981	52	33	4
1982	48	36	5
1983	68	50	7
1984	71	62	3
1985	69	92	5
1986	75	49	24
1987	64	43	3
1988	66	50	8
1989	69	63	7
1990	79	52	3
1991	49	34	20
1992	71	67	1
1993	72	68	5
1994	61	65	4
1995	61	56	4
1996	65	69	17

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to amend the quarantine regulations in respect of animals entering this country. [3393]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend, the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on 11 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *508*.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Student Loans

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the average amount owed by further education *(a)* students and *(b)* mature students in Northern Ireland to (i) the Student Loans Company and (ii) personal banks as a result of and at the end of their period of study, broken down into local authority areas; and if she will make a statement. [2741]

Mr. Worthington: Information on student indebtedness to banks is not collected centrally. I have asked the Chief Executive of the Student Loans Company to write to the hon. Member about average debt to the Student Loans Company at 31 March 1997.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of *(a)* how many and *(b)* what percentage of mature students studying for (i) undergraduate degrees and (ii) equivalent vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland currently (1) are entitled to and (2) claim grants for (A) teaching fees and (B) maintenance, broken down into local authority areas; and if she will make a statement. [2739]

Mr. Worthington: The information is not collected centrally.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the average maintenance *(a)* grant and *(b)* loan awarded to mature students in Northern Ireland in each year of study; and if she will make a statement. [2740]

Mr. Worthington: The available information on student awards does not separately identify those awards received by mature students. Information on the average student loan is not available in the form requested, either in the Department or in the Student Loans Company. However, the average loan to students in Higher Education Institutions in Northern Ireland, aged 26 years and over at the start of their course in the academic year 1995–96 was £1,080.

RUC Station, Coleraine

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she expects work to begin on the new RUC station in Coleraine. [2540]

Mr. Ingram: A new RUC Station in Coleraine has a high priority. The commencement of this work will be dependent upon the availability of funding, but it is unlikely that work on it will start before the final quarter of the 1998–99 financial year.

Hunt Kennels

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many visits were made to hunt kennels in each month of the last year in respect of the enforcement of SMB controls in Northern Ireland; what was the percentage judged to be unsatisfactory in each month; and if she will make a statement. [2786]

Mr. Murphy: The following table details the number of visits made to hunt kennels each month during 1996 and the percentage judged to be unsatisfactory.

	Number of visits	*Percentage unsatisfactory*
January	3	0
February	2	50
March	3	0
April	2	50
May	3	67
June	2	0
July	1	0
August	3	67
September	13	46
October	20	55
November	19	32
December	9	33

Mature Students

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of *(a)* how many and *(b)* what percentage of those studying for (i) undergraduate degrees and (ii) equivalent vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland are mature students; and if she will make a statement. [2738]

Mr. Worthington: There are no direct equivalencies between undergraduate degrees and vocational qualifications. The following table provides an analysis by qualification aim of those studying at undergraduate level in HE institutions in Northern Ireland in 1996–97.

Undergraduate students in higher education establishments[1] in Northern Ireland 1996–97

Qualification aim	*Mature students[2]*	*All students*	*Percentage mature*
First degree	11,475	24,178	47.5
Professional qualifications	194	201	96.5
Diploma/Certificate in HE	225	376	59.8
HND/HNC	322	1,100	29.3
NVQ/SVQ levels 4 and 5	0	0	—
Institutional credit	2,322	2,337	99.4
Foundation course	131	241	54.4
Other undergraduate	612	618	99.0
Total	15,281	29,051	52.6

[1] Excludes HE in FE establishments.

[2] Students aged 21 or over in the current academic year.

The participation of mature students in Higher Education in Northern Ireland continues to increase and this is to be welcomed.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland by what means her Department makes available its publications in *(a)* Braille, *(b)* audio tape and *(c)* large print, and how this is publicised. [1663]

Mr. Murphy *[pursuant to his answer 10 June, Official Report columns 432–33]:* The information regarding all the Northern Ireland Departments is as follows:

The Departments of Agriculture and Education do not produce any publications in the formats specified.

The Department of Environment's Roads Service and Water Service have produced charter statements and information leaflets in the formats specified. This information is available through the Royal National Institute for the Blind, who advise their members on the availability of the information. The Roads Service also produces an audio tape outlining on street parking concessions for registered blind people and those with severe disability handicaps. This tape is available through Roads Service Divisional Offices, Disability Action and the Blind Centre for Northern Ireland, all of whom advise interested customers of the tape's availability.

The Heritage Service provides park leaflets, trail leaflets and exhibition texts in both Braille and audio tape at Crawfordsburn Country Park and advertises these services in the PHAB (Physically Handicapped and Able Bodies) magazine.

The Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) has adopted a policy that all documents addressed to the workforce or the public should be considered for publication in alternative formats. All published documents contain information on the availability of the document in alternative formats. DHSS also works closely with the appropriate voluntary bodies in the drafting and distribution of material published in alternative formats.

The Department of Finance and Personnel's Citizen's Charter Unit has produced all documents in the formats specified since January 1997. These documents are available from the Royal Institute for the Blind and this fact is outlined in each document.

The Department of Economic Development publishes all Disability Advice Service Information in the formats specified. In addition, material on Industrial Tribunals Procedure, citizens charter statement and information on the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme are also available in Braille, large print and audio. Information on Employees' Rights, Race Relations and Redundancy Payments Service Charter Standard, are available in large print. Some of this information will be publicised on the internet. Domestic Energy Efficiency publications have been mentioned on Blind Radio and copies supplied to The Royal Institute for the Blind.

The Compensation Agency has produced three publications in the formats specified:

(i) Guide to Criminal Injuries Compensation

(ii) Guide to Criminal Damage Compensation

(iii) Agency Charter Statement

and these are available upon request or through the Citizens' Advice Bureaux. In addition the Agency runs a Community Awareness Programme where the publications, in their various formats, are available as required.

MRSA

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many cases of MSRA have been recorded in each health authority district in Northern Ireland in each of the last 12 months. [2982]

Mr. Worthington *[Pursuant to his answer 11 June, Official Report column 498]:* The information is not available centrally. However, I recognise the anomaly between Northern Ireland and England, Scotland and Wales, and I will be asking officials to investigate. I will write to the hon. Member at the conclusion of these investigations.

DEFENCE

Naval Gunnery Support Range

10. **Mr. Matthew Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the Government will review the decision to transfer the naval gunnery support range to Cornwall from Portland. [2050]

Dr. Reid: Naval Gunfire Support training is now operating successfully in the exercise areas off Dodman Point, on the South Cornwall coast. I have already carefully examined this question, and I have no plans to review further the decision to transfer it, or the other elements of Royal Navy Operational Sea Training.

Chinook Helicopter Accident

13. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will review the findings of the RAF Board of Inquiry into the Chinook helicopter accident in June 1994. [2053]

Mr. Spellar: We are content that the Inquiry into the Chinook accident was thorough and exhaustive. All possible causes were carefully examined and no new evidence has subsequently come to light to cause us to doubt the inquiry's findings.

Gulf War Veterans

14. **Mr. Kidney:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he last met representatives from the Gulf War Veterans Association to discuss Gulf war syndrome. [2054]

Dr. Reid: As part of our commitment to listening to their concerns, the Secretary of State for Defence and I met veterans' representatives, including members of the Gulf Veterans Association, on 29 May. I was encouraged by the welcome extended by veterans to the new measures I announced last month, including new research on the effects of vaccines, additional resources for the medical assessment programme and a full and open explanation of the scientific basis on which our troops were protected against Biological Warfare in the Gulf.

21. **Mr. Kemp:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he last met representatives from the Gulf War Veterans Association to discuss issues relating to their service in the Gulf. [2062]

Dr. Reid: As part of our commitment to listen to their concerns, the Secretary of State for Defence and I met veterans' representatives, including members of the Gulf Veterans Association, on 29 May. A wide range of issues was discussed.

26. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to receive the preliminary assessment of the causes of Gulf war illness from the current review. [2067]

Mr. Reid: The Ministry of Defence is funding two epidemiological studies into the health of Gulf veterans and their families. These aim to identify whether there are any unusual patterns of ill health and if so to relate these to common risk factors so far as possible. Research of this type is not intended to test any particular casual hypothesis. The studies commenced earlier this year and have an expected duration of three years. It is too soon to predict when preliminary results might become available. Proposals for implementation of the research into the possible health effects of having multiple vaccinations and taking other medications concurrently, which was announced on 11 May, are currently being developed.

Defence Review

15. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to announce the result of his defence policy review; and if he will make a statement. [2055]

Mr. George Robertson: I expect the Strategic Defence Review to be completed around the turn of the year. I will make a statement to the House as soon as practicable thereafter.

19. **Mr. Waterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has had from the defence-related industries about his proposed defence review. [2059]

Mr. Robertson: I have received a number of letters from Defence Trade Associations, companies and individuals offering inputs into the Strategic Defence Review.

23. **Mr. Martin Bell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Government's strategic defence review and its impact on the welfare of service families. [2064]

Dr. Reid: The Strategic Defence Review will decide how our Armed Forces should be structured, equipped and deployed to meet our nation's interests and commitments. Decisions will take full account of the implications for the welfare of Service personnel and their families.

27. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the likely impact of his strategic review on defence procurement. [2068]

Mr. Robertson: The Strategic Defence Review will ensure the Armed Forces are properly equipped to undertake the tasks we ask of them. The Government are also committed to a strong British defence industry as a strategic part of our industrial base as well as our defence effort. There will be no moratorium and business will proceed as normally as possible. Decisions on major equipment programmes not yet under contract will be considered on their individual circumstances and in relation to progress with the Review. Projects already under contract will continue.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if his forthcoming Defence Review will be based on the assumption of unchanged expenditure plans. [2061]

Mr. Robertson: The Strategic Defence Review will be foreign policy led rather than driven by resources. The Government are committed to the spending plans already laid down for the next two years.

Defence Industry

16. **Mr. Hutton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proposals the Government have to improve co-operation with the United Kingdom defence industry. [2056]

Mr. Spellar: A strong industry is necessary to a strong defence. Co-operation between the Ministry of Defence and defence industry is already close, for example through the National Defence Industries Council, through conferences on future requirements and in many other ways. The Government intend that such co-operation should continue and improve.

Nuclear Weapons

17. **Mr. McAllion:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking towards the elimination of nuclear weapons. [2057]

Dr. Reid: We have already made clear our commitment to the goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons and to press for multilateral negotiations towards mutual, balanced and verifiable reductions in nuclear weapons. We will be examining how best to implement that commitment, particularly in the context of the Strategic Defence Review.

32. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the number of nuclear weapons which are vulnerable to an early strike; and if he will make a statement. [2073]

Dr. Reid: In current circumstances, the risk of any attack on our nuclear forces is very low. The invulnerability of our deterrent submarines when deployed at sea ensures that our nuclear forces are safe from attack in a crisis.

West Indies Guard Ship

18. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the role of the West Indies guard ship. [2058]

Dr. Reid: As I know my hon. Friend is aware from his visit as a member of the Armed Forces parliamentary scheme the West Indies Guard Ship together with her Royal Fleet auxiliary tanker, provide support to our Dependent Territories and other UK interests in the region. They carry out a range of tasks, including contributing to the international fight against drug trafficking, disaster relief, goodwill visits and training for Caribbean forces.

Former Yugoslavia

20. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement concerning the role of United Kingdom troops in the former Yugoslavia. [2060]

Mr. George Robertson: British troops are continuing to make a most effective and widely respected contribution to the multinational stabilisation force mission to implement the Dayton Peace Agreement.

European Fighter Aircraft

22. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many jobs will come to the United

Kingdom during the next five years as a result of the manufacture and deployment of the European fighter aircraft. [2063]

Mr. Spellar: Currently there are about 6,000 high technology jobs sustained by the development phase of the Eurofighter programme in the UK. This figure is expected to rise to about 14,000 at the peak of production.

NATO

24. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the implications of the new accord between NATO and Russia. [2065]

Mr. George Robertson: The Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Co-operation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation was signed in Paris on 27 May by the Heads of State and Government of NATO and Russia. It provides the foundation for co-operation, openness and consultation between the North Atlantic Alliance and Russia across a wide range of security issues of common interest. The Government welcome the Act and look forward to building on that foundation.

30. **Caroline Flint:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress towards NATO enlargement. [2071]

Mr. Robertson: The NATO Summit on 8 and 9 July will invite one or more countries of Central and Eastern Europe to begin negotiations for accession to NATO membership, and will reaffirm the Alliance's continuing willingness in future to consider taking in countries which share its principles and can contribute to European security. The Alliance will decide collectively, nearer the Summit, which countries should receive invitations.

Future Large Aircraft

25. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement concerning the future large aircraft. [2066]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) on 2 June, *Official Report*, column *13*.

Eurofighter

28. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to announce an order for production of Eurofighter. [2069]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) on 9 June 1997, *Official Report*, columns *353–54*.

Information Technology

29. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the programme to introduce IT for the three armed services. [2070]

Mr. Spellar: There are comprehensive programmes for the introduction of Information Technology into Armed Services. The Joint Command Systems Initiative is being developed to provide a tri-Service framework for future Command, Control and Intelligence systems which are interoperable with those of our Allies. In addition, each of the Armed Services has an approved strategy for the introduction of Information Technology. These strategies are designed to ensure that Information Technology contributes to the effective conduct of Joint and single-Service operations and improved efficiency. This is achieved by the adoption of common management and technical standards, designed to improve interoperability between the equipment of the three Services and our Allies. Moreover, a comprehensive range of training in Information Technology has been developed to meet the requirements of the three Services.

Land Release

31. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what new proposals he has to release land presently used by the services for alternative environmental purposes. [2072]

Mr. Spellar: My Department continually reviews the size of the Defence estate to ensure that it is no larger than necessary to meet the essential requirements of the Armed Forces. Our policy is to dispose of surplus property in a timely manner which takes into account the Government's wider employment and environmental objectives, local planning and social considerations, and the need to protect the taxpayers' interests.

Search and Rescue Helicopters

33. **Mr. Ainger:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if his Defence Review will include examination of the provision of search and rescue helicopters around the United Kingdom. [2074]

Mr. Spellar: The Strategic Defence Review will decide how our Armed Forces should be structured, equipped and deployed to meet our national interests and commitments. The primary role of our search and rescue helicopters in peacetime is to provide cover for military exercises and training flights, although in a secondary role they also make a significant contribution to civil search and rescue.

Trident

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to modify the existing policy on numbers of Trident missile warheads. [1979]

Dr. Reid: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) on 11 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *486*.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what military threats nuclear warheads on Trident submarines are designed to combat; and what is the minimum number of vessels needed for these purposes. [3630]

Dr. Reid: Our nuclear deterrent forces ensure that the United Kingdom is safe from any threat of nuclear coercion and contribute to the Alliance's policy of war prevention. The Government are committed to the fourth Trident submarine and will maintain strong defences while pressing for multilateral negotiations towards mutual, balanced and verifiable reductions in nuclear weapons.

Special Advisers

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the names of his special advisers, and those of his Ministers, stating their qualifications relating to those appointments. [1978]

Mr. George Robertson: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) on 6 June, *Official Report*, column 255.

Vacant MOD Homes

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the number and proportion of MOD homes currently vacant; what are the reasons for them being empty; what were the equivalent figures a year ago; and how many homes have been empty for more than 12 months. [3644]

Mr. Spellar: As at 31 March 1997, the most recent date for which figures are available, the Ministry of Defence held a stock of 65,800 Service families quarters in Great Britain of which 13,142 were empty. Directly comparable figures for March 1996 are not available due to the transfer of responsibility for reporting for properties in Great Britain from the individual Services to the Defence Housing Executive at which time the format changed. However, equivalent figures are available for June 1996 and these are as given.

	March 1997	*June 1996*
Total stock	65,800	69,348
Number empty	13,142	13,149
Reasons:		
Identified for disposal	1,755	3,629
Allocated to incoming families	3,364	3,535
Awaiting major works	2,533	1,923
Temporarily surplus, seeking lease out agreement	633	459
On military base (not available to dispose of or lease out due to security constraints)	1,117	828
Remainder empty and under review	3,740	2,775

It is not possible to identify how many of the properties currently empty have been empty for more than 12 months as the information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Select Committee on Defence

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if, as part of the strategic defence review, he will authorise civilian and military personnel in his Department to discuss policy options with the Select Committee on Defence. [1993]

Mr. George Robertson: We will be involving the Select Committee on Defence in the Strategic Defence Review. Evidence given by officials in this context will of course comply with the guidance contained in Departmental Evidence and Response to Select Committees issued by the Cabinet Office in January this year. A copy of the document is in the Library of the House.

Arms Diversification Agency

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to establish an arms diversification agency within his Department. [1992]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon).

Defence Diversification Agency

Mr. John Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he intends to make a statement on the creation of a defence diversification agency. [1915]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave today to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon).

Trade Union Representation

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his policy on introducing trade union representation into the Armed Forces. [1994]

Dr. Reid: Because of the special nature of Service life, it is my Department's policy not to have a Service union or federation for Service personnel. However, the Ministry of Defence does have agreements with a number of major unions and concessions with professional associations whereby Service personnel may be recognised as eligible for membership. We have no plans at present to change this system.

Service pay and allowances, and the charges related to services provided, are governed by an independent Pay Review Body. In addition, Service personnel have statutory redress of complaint procedures under which they have the right to submit a complaint to the Defence Council. The details of these procedures are kept under review.

Helicopters

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to rationalise the command and control of attack and support helicopters under one service. [1976]

Dr. Reid: The Government have no plans to rationalise the command and control of attack and support helicopters under one Service. Should there be any changes arising from the Strategic Defence Review, they will be announced when the Review is complete.

Statement on Defence Estimates

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when his Department intends to publish the present year's Statement on Defence Estimates. [1977]

Dr. Reid: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) on 3 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *121*. I am also aware that since placing this question the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk has written to the Secretary of State on this subject and I shall be responding to him.

Rearming

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the warning time required for the United Kingdom to rearm in the event of a major threat. [1980]

Dr. Reid: Warning times for conflict are kept under continuous review. We currently assess the warning time for the re-emergence of a major threat of general war proportions to be measured in years; and the trend in this respect is towards longer warning times.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) when he intends to visit the Joint Rapid Deployment Force; [1981]

(2) when he intends to visit the RAF strike command at High Wycombe; [1982]

(3) when he intends to visit the permanent joint headquarters at Northwood; [1984]

(4) when he intends to visit 1 (UK) Armoured Division; [1985]

(5) when he intends to visit HMS Illustrious. [1987]

Mr. George Robertson: I place a very high priority on visits to MOD establishments and to the three Services. I have recently visited the Armed Forces in Northern Ireland and Bosnia and plan to make a number of other visits in the coming weeks.

Mr. Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he intends to visit DML Plymouth [1983]

Mr. Robertson: I have no plans at present to visit DML at Plymouth.

Married Quarters

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are his Department's criteria for the allocation of married quarters to service personnel. [1986]

Dr. Reid: Services Families Accommodation, either in the form of married quarters or property rented from the private sector is provided for occupation by Service personnel with their families subject to the following criteria:

(a) Service personnel must be aged 18 or over, have completed their initial training and be serving on a regular engagement with the UK Armed Forces, or be Full Commitment Reserves;

(b) They must be married or, if divorced, have a requirement to provide a home for dependent children;

(c) They must have at least 6 months to serve at the station where they qualify for the married quarter;

(d) The allocation of married quarters to officers is currently based on rank and that for other ranks on family size.

Defence Procurement Questions

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which Minister in his Department is responsible for answering defence procurement questions. [1988]

Mr. George Robertson: Day-to-day responsibility for defence procurement matters lies with the Minister of State for Defence Procurement. In this House, responsibility for answering questions on his behalf on these matters will normally fall to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State.

Working Week Directive

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the impact of the EU's 48 Hour Working Week directive on the operational effectiveness of the Armed Forces. [1989]

Dr. Reid: Our current assessment is that Article 1.3 of the Working Time Directive excludes from its scope most of the activities of the Armed Forces by virtue of its reference to Article 2 of the Health and Safety Framework Directive. We are continuing to assess the precise impact of the Directive and my officials are in consultation with the Department of Trade and Industry, the lead department for this subject.

Court Martial Cases Inquiry

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if his inquiry into British court martial cases resulting in the death penalty will extend beyond First World War cases. [1990]

Dr. Reid: The boundaries for the forthcoming reassessment of British court martial cases resulting in the death penalty have yet to be determined. In setting these boundaries however, it will be important to take care that in addressing one perceived injustice, we do not create another.

Departmental Spending

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the likely level of underspending or overspending by his Department in the current financial year. [1991]

Dr. Reid: My Department aims to deliver the Defence Programme for the current year within the available resources granted by Parliament.

Land Mines

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in what exceptional military circumstances the use of land mines will be permitted; and what steps he intends to take to limit and monitor this exceptional use. [3404]

Dr. Reid: We have introduced a complete moratorium on the use of anti-personnel land mines. That moratorium would be suspended only if Ministers judged that, for a specific operation, the security of our Armed Forces would be jeopardised without the possibility of the use of anti-personnel land mines. It is impossible to predict what such exceptional circumstances might be, but Ministers would wish to be satisfied that it was not feasible to provide adequate protection for our Armed Forces using other means. We have made clear that we would report any such decision to Parliament at the earliest possible opportunity.

Any use of anti-personnel land mines by UK Armed Forces would be strictly in accordance with international humanitarian law.

Mr. Bruce George: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the HB876 area-denial submunition complies with internationally agreed requirements for the reliability of anti-personnel land mines. [4232]

Dr. Reid: The HB876 area-denial submunition is an integral component of the JP233 Airfield Attack Weapon, and is therefore quite different from the types of land mine which have raised justifiable humanitarian concerns. HB876 nevertheless is an anti-personnel land mine under the meaning of the amended Protocol II to the United Nations Weaponry Convention. We will therefore withdraw JP233 from service no later than 2005, in accordance with the policy announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 22 May, *Official Report*, column *708*. Until withdrawal, we have introduced a complete moratorium on the operational use of JP233, which would be suspended only if we judge that for a specific operation the security of our Armed Forces would be jeopardised without the possibility of its use. Any such exceptional decision, and the circumstances which led to it, would be reported to Parliament.

Under the terms of the amended Protocol II to the UN Weaponry Convention, all remotely-delivery anti-personnel land mines must comply with certain criteria on the reliability of their self-destruct and deactivation capabilities. In conjunction with the manufacturer, Hunting Engineering Limited (HEL), my Department has carried out a detailed assessment of HB876 and we are satisfied that it complies with these criteria. Copies of unclassified versions of the HEL report into HB876, and a further report by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency validating HEL's tests, have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Armed Forces (Civilian Staff)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list each British Army establishment employing civilian staff, indicating *(a)* the number of staff at each establishment and *(b)* the role of that establishment; [3277]

(2) if he will list each Royal Air Force establishment employing civilian staff, indicating *(a)* the number of staff at each establishment and *(b)* the role of that establishment; [3278]

(3) if he will list each Royal Navy establishment employing civilian staff, indicating *(a)* the number of staff at each establishment and *(b)* the role of that establishment; [3279]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Naval Deployments (NATO)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he next plans to deploy a Royal Navy task group outside the NATO area. [3266]

Dr. Reid: Royal Navy units in small Groups regularly operate outside the NATO area. On current plans, the next major, carrier-led Task Group out of area would be in the year 2000.

British Army of the Rhine

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the annual running cost of the British Army of the Rhine; and what were the figures for *(a)* 1974, *(b)* 1979 and *(c)* 1988 at current prices. [3267]

Dr. Reid: The British Army of the Rhine ceased to exist as a formation from 1 April 1994 when 1(UK) Armoured division and the United Kingdom Support Command (Germany) became fully operational under Headquarters Land Command. The estimated running costs for Financial Year 1997–98 for the Army in Germany is £1,163 million. I regret that I am unable to provide comparable costs for 1974, 1979 and 1988 as these were compiled on a different basis.

Service Personnel (Electoral Registration)

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what special arrangements are currently in force to enable service personnel posted at short notice to vote in local, parliamentary and European elections. [3202]

Mr. Spellar: Service personnel and their spouses may decide to become Service voters by making a Service declaration. This declaration must be made no later than 10 October in any given year for qualifying addresses in England, Scotland and Wales, or 15 September in Northern Ireland. Should a Serviceman be posted overseas he may vote by proxy in the constituency in which he is registered. If he is posted elsewhere in the UK he may vote either by proxy or post.

Should a Service person be posted at very short notice, i.e. after 5pm 11 working days prior to an election, they would be unable to vote as their method of voting could not be changed in time.

In cases of illness however, the time permitted for changing a person's voting procedure is reduced to six working days. The deadlines above apply to all voters are not only to Service personnel.

Pension Schemes

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to examine the operation of private occupational pension schemes in respect of interrupted service resulting from national service; and if he will make a statement. [3750]

Mr. Spellar: There are no plans. The operation of occupational pension schemes is not a matter for the Ministry of Defence. The treatment, for pension purposes, of any break in career due to national service will be dependant upon the member's scheme's rules and the effect of the application of Inland Revenue limits on financial retirement benefits.

CS Mist Sprayer

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which British military or special forces have been issued with the Manroy L80 Manpack CS Mist Backpack Sprayer. [3589]

Dr. Reid: I understand that the Manroy L80 Manpack CS Mist Backpack Sprayer has never been issued to any British Forces and that it has never been purchased by my Department.

Foreign Military Personnel (Training)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many training places have been offered to foreign military personnel over the last 10 years; and which countries were involved. [3268]

Dr. Reid: Records of the number of training places offered to overseas students are not maintained. According to our records, the numbers of overseas students attending courses in the UK in the last 10 years are:

1987–88: 4,844
1988–89: 5,131
1989–90: 4,734
1990–91: 4,083
1991–92: 4,229
1992–93: 4,071
1993–94: 4,183
1994–95: 4,170
1995–96: 4,130
1996–97: 3,793

These figures may include some non-military personnel including police and customs officials. Details of these are not held separately.

These figures cover students from the following countries and Dependent Territories:

Albania
Algeria
Anguilla
Antigua and Barbuda
Argentina
Australia
Austria
Bahamas
Bahrain
Bangladesh
Barbados
Belarus
Belgium
Belize
Bermuda
Botswana
Brazil
British Virgin Islands
Brunei
Bulgaria
Burma
Cameroon
Canada
Cayman Islands
Chad
Chile
China
Congo
Croatia
Cyprus
Czech Republic
Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire)
Denmark
Djibouti
Dominica
Ecuador
Egypt
El Salvador
Estonia
Ethiopia
Falkland Islands
Fiji
Finland
France
Gambia
Georgia
Germany
Ghana
Gibraltar
Greece
Grenada
Guatemala
Guyana
Honduras
Hong Kong
Hungary
Iceland
India
Indonesia
Iran
Iraq
Ireland
Israel
Italy
Ivory Coast
Jamaica
Japan
Jordan
Kenya
Kuwait
Kyrgyzstan
Latvia
Lebanon
Lesotho
Libya
Lithuania
Luxembourg
Macedonia
Malawi
Malaysia
Maldives
Malta
Mauritania
Mauritius
Mexico
Moldova
Montserrat
Morocco
Mozambique
Namibia
Nepal
Netherlands

New Zealand
Nigeria
Norway
Oman
Pakistan
Papua New Guinea
Paraguay
Peru
Philippines
Poland
Portugal
Qatar
Romania
Russia
St. Kitts and Nevis
St. Lucia
St. Vincent
Saudi Arabia
Senegal
Seychelles
Sierra Leone
Singapore
Slovakia
Slovenia
Somalia
South Africa
South Korea
Spain
Sri Lanka
Sudan
Swaziland
Sweden
Switzerland
Tanzania
Thailand
Tonga
Trinidad and Tobago
Turkey
UAE
Uganda
Ukraine
Uruguay
USA
Venezuela
Yemen
Yugoslavia
Zambia
Zimbabwe

Medals and Campaign Stars

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the numbers and type of medals and campaign stars awarded to date to national service men who served between *(a)* 1939 and 1945 and *(b)* 1946 and 1963; and if he will make a statement. [3749]

Mr. Spellar: A list of the medals and campaign stars for which National Servicemen were eligible is as shown. In addition, they were eligible to be recommended for the full range of gallantry awards. No differentiation was made between National Servicemen and Regular personnel.

MEDALS AND CAMPAIGN STARS 1939–1945

1939–45 Star
Atlantic Star
Air Crew Europe Star
Africa Star
Pacific Star
Burma Star
Italy Star
France and Germany Star
Defence Medal
War Medal 1939–45

CAMPAIGN MEDALS 1945–1963

Korea Medal 1950–53—Al Services
Africa General Service Medal 1902–56 (with clasp)—All Services Kenya
Naval General Service Medal 1915–62 (with clasps)—Royal Navy
SE Asia 1945–46
Minesweeping 1945–51
Palestine 1945–48
Malaya
Yangtze 1949
Bomb and Mine Clearance 1945–53
Bomb and Mine Clearance Mediterranean
Cyprus
Near East
Arabian Peninsula
Brunei
General Service Medal 1918–62 (with clasps)—Army and RAF
SE Asia 1945–46
Bomb and Mine Clearance 1945–49
Bomb and Mine Clearance 1945–56
Palestine 1945–48
Malaya
Cyprus
Near East
Arabian Peninsula
Brunei
General Service Medal 1962 with clasp—All Services
Borneo
Other Operational Service Awards—All Services
United Nations Service Medal with clasp Korea
United Nations Service Medal for the Congo
Non-operational Medals 1945–1963
Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal 1953

No statistics are available showing the total number of medals awarded between the years 1939–1963.

Prisoners of War (Compensation)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to complete the review of compensation for prisoners of war who were protected personnel or officers; and if he will make a statement. [3130]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan), *Official Report*, column *485*.

Scottish Regiments

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the current posting of each battalion of the Scottish regiments indicating dates of commencement and expected departure. [3199]

Dr. Reid: The 1st Battalion Scots Guards was posted to Windsor in July 1993.

The battalion of the Scottish Division are stationed as follows:

The 1st Battalion The Royal Scots (The Royal Regiment) was posted to Colchester in August 1996.

The 1st Battalion The Royal Highland Fusiliers (Princess Margaret's Own Glasgow and Ayrshire Regiment) was posted to Fallingbostel, Germany in February 1994. The bulk of the Battalion is currently deployed in Belfast.

The 1st Battalion The King's Own Scottish Borderers was posted to Edinburgh in February 1995.

The 1st Battalion The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) was posted to Inverness in August 1996. The bulk of the Battalion is currently deployed in Hong Kong for 4 months between February and June this year.

The 1st Battalion The Highlanders (Seaforth, Gordons and Camerons) was posted to Catterick in April this year.

The 1st Battalion The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (Princess Louise's) was posted to Edinburgh in August 1995).

On security grounds I am withholding information on the future movement of the battalions under exemption of 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Contracting Out

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what decisions his Department has made about contracting out the administration of service *(a)* pay, *(b)* personnel and training records and *(c)* pensions; on what dates these decisions were made; when they will come into operation; which companies have been awarded these contracts; and if he will make a statement about the (i) cost savings, (ii) future quality of administration and (iii) security implications of these decisions. [3138]

Mr. Spellar: The Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency was launched on 1 April this year. Its tasks include record-keeping and the processing of pay and pensions for all Service personnel. The Agency's objectives and key targets are set out in its Corporate Plan, a copy of which was placed in the Library of the House. These require new IT systems to be developed to enable improvements in efficiency and performance.

Plans to appoint a commercial partner to provide most of the Agency's services, and to develop and operate the new systems, are continuing. This would be a private finance arrangement. Two companies remain on the short-list as a result of the competitive process. They are EDS (Defence) Ltd., and Siemens Business Services Ltd. Negotiations are nearing completion and final bids are expected to be invited by the end of this month. These will be evaluated against the cost of the Agency undertaking the work through normal in-house methods. A decision on the results of the evaluation is expected by the end of September. A partnering contract will be awarded only if one of the companies' bids offers the best value for money. Transfer of responsibility to the successful company, including most of the Agency's staff and capital assets, would then follow after 2 to 3 months.

The security implications of appointing a private sector partner have been a particular concern since the competitive process began in April 1996. It has been the subject of full consideration by the relevant security authorities and by the Services themselves. The two companies remaining in competition are the only ones to have demonstrated, amongst other fundamental matters, that they could meet and maintain the very rigorous standards required. The Agency's services will continue to be delivered from existing, secure MOD installations.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to amend the jobseeker's allowance to enable school cleaners to claim during the summer holidays. [1289]

Mr. Bradley: The Social Security Commissioners are currently considering a case in this area. We will review the position in the light of their conclusions.

Benefits Agency

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what indicators are incorporated into Benefits Agency district managers' performance targets; and if she will introduce a target for service delivery to local authorities; [625]

(2) what representations she had received from local authorities in respect of targets for the service that the Benefits Agency provides for the administration of housing and council tax benefits. [624]

Mr. Field: There are no current Secretary of State performance targets for Benefits Agency District Managers relating specifically to service delivery to local authorities. We have received no representations to introduce Benefits Agency service targets for Housing Benefit but are aware that the Local Authority Associations have expressed concern in the past about liaison between the Benefits Agency and local authorities. We will be reviewing the business relationship between the Benefits Agency and local authorities and within that review, we will consider the need for such a target over the coming months.

Performance targets for Benefits Agency District Managers are set every year. Current targets are in the tables.

Benefits Agency Secretary of State's targets for 1997–98
Accuracy targets

Benefit	*Percentage of cases* *1997–98 our targets are to pay the correct amount in*
Income Support	87
Incapacity Benefit[1]	94
Family Credit	91
Jobseekers Allowance	87
Disability Living Allowance	96

[1] Includes Incapacity Benefit, Severe Disablement Allowance and Maternity Allowance.

Financial recovery targets

	1997–98 our target is
Recovery of Social Fund loans	£333 million
Security[1]	[2]£2,100 million
Unemployed register sign-offs	160,000 claims withdrawn in 10 days 185,000 claims withdrawn in 28 days
Recovery of benefit overpayment[3]	£120 million

[1] Security Savings—target relates to weekly benefit savings from activity in the year. It includes activity funded through the new Spend to Save fraud and evasion package announced in the 1996 budget.
[2] This level of saving will reduce programmed expenditure by £1.6 billion in 1997–98.
[3] Overpayment of recovery target—now includes recoveries arising from security and control activities, and reflects an increase of 31.15 per cent. from 1996–97.

Claims clearance times targets

	1997–98 our target is to clear
Jobseekers Allowance	65 per cent. in 10 days 90 per cent. in 21 days
Faster Family Credit	90 per cent. in 5 days

Financial control targets

Our targets are to:

Manage the Agency's resources to deliver its business plan within the allocations from the Secretary of State.

Keep to the cash limit agreed with Treasury for the discretionary Social Fund budget approved by Parliament.

Housing Benefit

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to alter housing benefit regulations; and if she will make a statement. [1737]

Mr. Bradley: We are reviewing a range of Housing Benefit provisions. Any proposals for legislative changes will be announced in due course.

Pensioner Incomes

Mr. Hill: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage and number of *(a)* single pensioners and *(b)* pensioner couples have a total income of at least £125 per week; and what percentage and number of pensioner couples have a total of income of at least (i) £200 per week and (ii) £250 per week. [2122]

Mr. Denham: We are examining ways of getting more help to the poorest pensioners.

The information is in the tables.

Pensioner couples and single pensioners, with income of at least £125 pw

	Number	*Percentage of pensioner units*
Single pensioners	1,450,000	33 (singles)
Pensioner couples	2,450,000	91 (couples)

Pensioner couples only

	Number	*Percentage of pensioner units*
Income at least £200 per week	1,250,000	47
Income at least £250 per week	800,000	30

Source:
Pensioners' Incomes Series 1994–95.
Notes:
1. The information is based on gross unequivalised income before housing costs at July 1994 prices. Numbers of "pensioner units" are rounded to the nearest 50,000.
2. A pensioner unit is defined as a single person over State Pension Age (SPA) or a couple where the man, defined as the head, is over SPA.

Benefit Reviews

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many reviews of social security benefits are being conducted by her Department. [2674]

Mr. Field: We are committed to modernising the structure and delivery of Social Security in order to encourage independence, social cohesion and well being; to develop an active welfare system which supports work, savings and honesty; and to help tackle effectively unjustifiable social and economic inequalities. To that end we will be examining the major components of the system. We will consult on specific issues in due course.

Benefits Offices (Wales)

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement on the future of benefits offices in Wales. [3225]

Mr. Field: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) on 11 June, *Official Report,* columns *493-94.*

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to make asylum seekers eligible for benefit. [3387]

Mr. Bradley: Under current rules those asylum seekers who make an application for asylum when they first arrive in this country, or who make an application for asylum within three months of the Home Secretary declaring their

country subject to upheaval, are already eligible to claim Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Based), Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Those asylum seekers who make their application after they have arrived in this country, or who are appealing against a negative Home Office decision on their asylum application are not eligible to claim Social Security benefits.

However, we are committed to a wide ranging review of the Social Security system to reduce poverty and social division. We will consider the position of all claimants, including asylum seekers as part of this review.

Halliday Case

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to her answer of 2 June, *Official Report,* column *114,* relating to the recent House of Lords judgment on the Halliday case; what estimate she has made of the annual cost of the steps being taken by the Benefits Agency; and what preparatory actions were taken by her Department prior to the judgment. [2305]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 11 June 1997]:* The Benefits Agency are currently estimating the administrative costs arising from this judgment. Additional benefit expenditure on those cases covered by the judgment is estimated to be £3 million for 1997–98.

Preparatory actions included discussions with the Benefits Agency on the practicalities of handling the judgments; preparation of draft forms and circulars giving advice to staff in the Disability Benefits Directorate and the collection of information on cases which had already benefited under the original Commissioner's decision of 14 October 1994 in order to forecast the likely financial impact. Advice was also considered on the implications of the cases involved.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 17 June 1997

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review procedures related to asylum seekers from Sierra Leone and its neighbouring states. [3060]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Following the coup in Sierra Leone on 25 May, my Department has suspended the consideration of asylum applications from Sierra Leone nationals. A review of the handling of these cases is being conducted in close cooperation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but no decisions will be made on these asylum applications until the situation in Sierra Leone stabilises. The independent appellate authorities have been asked to suspend all appeal hearings relating to Sierra Leone nationals, and compulsory returns of refused asylum seekers have also been suspended. No one will be returned to Sierra Leone until we are satisfied it is safe to do so.

Criminal Injuries

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what is the total amount of legal and other costs so far spent by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board regarding the claim of Mr. Norman Cobb of Sunderland. [3236]

(2) how long has elapsed since Mr. Norman Cobb of Sunderland *(a)* was the victim of a criminal assault, *(b)* successfully applied for a judicial review of the initial decision to refuse his claim and *(c)* had his renewed application upheld; for what reason compensation has not been paid to him; and if he will make a sttaement. [3235]

Mr. Michael: Although the Secretary of State for the Home Department and the Secretary of State for Scotland have responsibility for general oversight of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme, Ministers have no locus to intervene in, nor do they comment on, the Board's handling of individual applications or their interpretation of the Scheme. Enquiries about individual cases should accordingly be addressed directly to the Board or, in the case of applications lodged on or after 1 April 1996, to its successor body, the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority.

However, I understand from the Board that:

a Mr. Cobb was assaulted 6 years and 9 months ago;

b Two years and 11 months have elapsed since the judicial review in question;

c The Board's consequent re-hearing was two years and 3 months ago, since when interim payments have been made while further examination of the medical aspects has been pursued; and

d The Board's estimated costs so far are £4,900, including £3,200 incurred by the judicial review.

Performing Animals

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many certificates of registration have been issued in England and Wales under the Performing Animals Act 1925 since 1967. [3554]

Mr. George Howarth: The numbers of certificates notified are:

1977: 30
1978: 19
1979: 10
1980: 18
1981: 27
1982: 27
1983: 15
1984: 33
1985: 21
1986: 22
1987: 19
1988: 17
1989: 23
1990: 24
1991: 36
1992: 38
1993: 44
1994: 16
1995: 18
1996: 12
1997 (to 16 June): 20.

The figures prior to 1977 are not available centrally.

Ivy Batten Murder Case

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date the C3 Department was informed by Devon and Cornwall police that a second witness was claiming to know the identity of the killer of Mrs. Ivy Batten; on what date this man's statement was made available to solicitors acting for Mr. Brian Parsons; and if he will make a statement. [3511]

Mr. Michael: A supplementary report on the case was completed by Devon and Cornwall Constabulary on 26 November 1996 and sent to the Home Office, although records do not show the exact date on which the report was received. A summary of the new evidence was contained in a Home Office letter to Mr. Parsons' solicitors dated 26 March 1997.

CS Mist Sprayer

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which British *(a)* police and *(b)* security forces have been issued with the Manroy L80 Manpack CS Mist Backpack Sprayer. [3587]

Mr. Michael: This equipment has not been issued to police or security personnel, neither is this under consideration.

Corruption

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if his plans to amend the law on corruption will extend to bribes offered by hon. Members and parliamentary candidates. [3212]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 12 June 1997]:* Yes.

Wrongful Conviction (Compensation)

Ms Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will continue to apply the provisions announced in 1985 for ex gratia payment of compensation for wrongful conviction or charge. [4435]

Mr. Straw: I can confirm that I shall continue to be bound by the provisions for ex-gratia payment of compensation as set out in the statement of the then Home Secretary, the right hon. Douglas Hurd to the House on 29 November 1985, *Official Report*, columns *691–92*. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has also agreed to continue to apply these provisions.

Interception of Communications

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many warrants authorising the interception of telecommunications were issued by the Home Secretary under the Interception of Communications Act 1985 in 1996. [4436]

Mr. Straw: A total of 1,073 warrants authorising the interception of communications were issued by the then Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe, in 1996. This figure is contained in the report of the Interception of Communications Commissioner which was published on 12 June. I regret that the answer given to my hon. Friend on 11 March, *Official Report*, column *148*, gave an incorrect number.

Task Force on Youth Justice

Mr. Cawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the task force on youth justice. [4437]

Mr. Straw: The role of the Task Force on Youth Justice is to advise Home Office Ministers on Government proposals for the development of youth justice policies and, in particular, to provide advice on taking forward an action plan as agreed by the interdepartmental Ministerial group on Youth Justice.

The Task Force may provide advice to the Home Secretary on policy papers prepared by Government officials for consideration by the Ministerial group and may propose to the Home Secretary action on any other youth justice issue.

The members of the task force are:

Norman Warner: Senior Policy Adviser, Home Office (Chairman).

William Atkinson: Headmaster, Phoenix High School, Shepherds Bush.

Jonathan Black: Magistrates' Clerk, Hampshire.

Catherine Bowker: Youth Court Prosecutor, Brighton.

Tony Butler: Chief Constable, Gloucestershire.

Paul Cavadino: Penal Affairs Consortium.

Anne Fuller: Lay Magistrate, Inner London.

Cedric Fullwood: Chief Probation Officer, Manchester.

Ian Johnston: Assistant Commissioner, Metropolitan Police.

David Norgrove: Marks and Spencer plc.

Denise Platt: Local Government Association.

Teresa Reynolds: Victim Support.

Joan Webster: Chief Superintendent, Gwent.

Geoffrey Wicks: Stipendiary Magistrate, Inner London.

Andrew Williamson: Director of Social Services, Devon.

John Lyon: Home Office.

Tom Luce: Department of Health.

Jenny Rowe: Lord Chancellor's Department.

Wild Boar

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce legislation to permit the shooting of wild boar in self-defence. [3921]

Ms Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

Current legislation does not prohibit anyone that legally owns a firearm from shooting a wild boar.

HEALTH

Slimming Pills

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will end the practice of private slimming clinics prescribing slimming pills. [3555]

Ms Jowell: The prescribing of slimming pills is the clinical responsibility of physicians, whether in the national health service or in private clinics. A recent report by the Royal College of Physicians provides guidance for practitioners on the use of slimming pills in the treatment of obesity.

The report identifies those pills which are of no value in the treatment of obesity and others which are. These are licensed for the treatment of obese patients—body mass index (BMI) 30 kg/m^2 or greater—who have not responded to an appropriate weight reducing regimen. It also recommends that patients are subjected to regular review by the prescribing physician and where treatment is initiated by another physician that the patient's general practitioner should be notified in writing. Anyone who considers that physicians are prescribing inappropriately, should notify the General Medical Council.

Tobacco Advertising

Miss Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made on the drawing up of a timetable for the phasing out of tobacco advertising. [3761]

Ms Jowell: Details of the Government's strategy to reduce smoking, including legislation to ban tobacco advertising, will be set out in a White Paper, which will be published later in the year. The White Paper will be informed by the summit of national and international experts in the field of smoking reduction, arranged for 14 July.

Hospital Appointments (Non-attendance)

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people failed to keep their appointments at NHS hospitals in 1996 in *(a)* North Derbyshire health authority and *(b)* England and Wales; and what was the estimated cost of non-attendance to the NHS. [3341]

Mr. Milburn: The figures available for 1995–96 for England and National Health Service trusts in North Derbyshire are set out in the attached table. My hon. Friend may wish to contact my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales about figures for Wales.

The Department of Health does not collect financial information about patients who fail to keep hospital appointments.

Figures for non-attendances for out-patient and in-patient hospital appointments in 1995–96 for England and trusts in North Derbyshire

Area	Out-patients 'Did not attend'	In-patients 'Failed to attend'
England	5,461,299	207,515
Chesterfield and North Derbyshire Royal Hospital NHS Trust	18,000	536
North Derbyshire Community NHS Trust	3,474	39

Source:
Department of Health form KH09 and KH06.

EC Health Council

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the outcome of the June EC Health Council meeting. [3420]

Ms Jowell: I represented the Government at the meeting of the Health Council on 5 June in Luxembourg.

Following conciliation with the European Parliament, the Council adopted a joint text for a decision establishing a programme of Community action on Health Monitoring. The Council also adopted a common position on the Commission's proposal for a decision creating a Community network for the epidemiological surveillance and control of communicable diseases. The Council agreed the text of a resolution on migrant doctors and conclusions noting recent developments of interest to Health Ministers in the drugs-related health field. The Council requested the European Commission to study current practice in the Member States concerning cross-border cooperation in the supply of organs and tissues of human origin for medical purposes. There was a short orientation debate on the Commission's communication on measures to combat tobacco consumption and a brief discussion of a Presidency paper on blood safety and self-sufficiency in the Community. The Council took note of developments since its last discussion of Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies and agreed to keep the subject under review. The Council also took note of progress made by the taskforce set up to develop a global early warning system and response network for communicable diseases within the context of the EU–US action plan agreed in December 1994 and of new Commission proposals for programmes of Community action on rare diseases and injury prevention.

Young People (Psychiatric Treatment)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many young people between the ages of *(a)* 11 and 16 and *(b)* 16 and 25 years (i) are undergoing and (ii) have undergone psychiatric treatment under the NHS; and in each case what were the figures in (1) 1987 and (2) 1992. [3451]

Mr. Boateng: The information available centrally relates to inpatients treated in National Health Service hospitals. The table shows the number of finished consultant episodes where the patient was under the care of a consultant with a main specialty of mental illness. Comparable figures are not available for 1987.

Finished consultant episodes by main specialty of mental illness and age at end of episode

England

Age at end of episode	1989–90	1991–92	1994–95
11–16	2,830	2,040	2,690
17–25	24,150	23,230	24,890

Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics.

Diabetes

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to allow pen needles to be made available on prescription for people with diabetes who require insulin; and if he will make a statement. [4138]

Mr. Milburn: We are currently considering whether general practitioners should be allowed to prescribe insulin injection pen needles on the national health service.

Breast Cancer

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made on reviewing breast screening services in Devon; and if he will make a statement. [4434]

Mr. Dobson: I have asked Sir Kenneth Calman, the Chief Medical Officer to undertake a review with a remit:

to visit the Royal and Devon and Exeter Hospital Trust to establish the facts surrounding the provision of breast services;

to report the findings of the Review team to me;

in the light of these, to consider the implications for breast services as a whole;

to report on the conclusions.

The members of the Review team will be:

Sir Kenneth Calman

Dame Deirdre Hine, Chief Medical Officer, Wales

Dr. Mike Brindle, President of the Royal College of Radiologists

Mr. Richard Sainsbury, Consultant Surgeon, Huddersfield Royal Infirmary

Mrs. Gill Oliver, Cancer Nursing Specialist (Liverpool)

Miss Phyllis Cunningham, Chief Executive, Royal Marsden NHS Trust

Miss Polly Toynbee

I will keep the House informed about the progress of the Review.

East Surrey Hospital

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the waiting times at the East Surrey hospital for first routine out-patient appointments and admission for elective surgery treatment by each specialty area as at April 1997. [2313]

Ms Jowell: The latest available information on waiting times for first outpatient appointments is contained in "Waiting Times for First Outpatient Appointments in England: Detailed Statistics, Quarter ended 31 December 1996", copies of which are available in the Library. This shows, by individual trust and specialty, the numbers of patients seen during the quarter following written referral to a consultant by a general practitioner and how long they had waited, by timeband.

Inpatient and day case waiting time information collected centrally does not identify separately those patients waiting for surgery. The information that is available covers all patients awaiting admission to hospital, whether it be for surgery or some other form of treatment. The latest gives the provisional position on 31 March 1997 and shows that on that date there were 4,508 patients awaiting admission to East Surrey Hospital of whom 4,282 had been waiting less than 12 months. Provisional information is not available by specialty. Final figures due to be published next month in "Hospital Waiting List Statistics: England at 31 March 1997" will be presented on a trust and specialty basis.

Carers

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to respond to the recommendations made in the report by the Carers National Association, "Still Battling—the Carers Act" one year on; [3080]

(2) if he will ensure the implementation of all the provisions of the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995. [3186]

Mr. Boateng: We strongly support the principles of the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act. We welcome Carers National' Association's report which considers the impact of the Act, in particular carers' take-up of rights under the Act and the approach taken by local authorities to implementing its provisions. The report also notes the value of the Department's guidance on implementation, which was issued to authorities in February 1996.

We have regular and close contact with the Association through which we wish to explore and to clarify a number of the points raised in the report.

As part of our programme of research into community care outcomes, we are looking at the impact of the Act. In the more immediate future, a Social Services Inspectorate inspection on care support is in preparation. Taking forward earlier work, this will concentrate on how local authorities are implementing the Act.

Community Care

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his Department's policy to extend the community care direct payment scheme to people aged 65 years and over. [3187]

Mr. Boateng: We want to improve the quality and choice of support that is available to disabled people, and so we will certainly examine very carefully the possibility of extending eligibility for direct payments.

Mixed Sex Wards

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to introduce guidelines for hospitals in respect of mixed wards; and if he will make a statement. [3411]

Mr. Milburn: Guidance on single sex accommodation was issued in an Executive Letter to the National Health Service in January. Further action is being considered following recent survey of health authorities' target dates for meeting the key objectives set out in the guidance.

General Practitioners

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many GPs completed training and commenced practice in each of the last five years; how many he expects to commence practice in each of the next two years; and if he will make a statement. [3410]

Mr. Milburn: The available information is shown in the table.

(i) New Joiners in England 1991–1996

	Stock[1]	New joiners[2]
1991	25,690	1,250
1992	25,970	1,130
1993	26,290	1,130
1994	26,570	1,190
1995	26,700	1,060
1996	26,860	—

Source:
GMS database October 1991–1996.
Notes:
[1] Stock refers to number of GPs (unrestricted principals) at 1 October. An unrestricted principal is a practitioner who provides the full range of general medical services and whose list is not limited to any particular group of persons.
[2] The New-Joiners figures are derived from the annual GMS Census and show the number of principals who have started practising as fully qualified GPs in the 12 months between each census.

(ii) Numbers of new-joiners in England in 1997 and 1998

No estimates are available on the number of GPs expecting to commence practice in the next two years. Although there were 1,305 trainees in England in General Practice on 1 October 1996, not all of these will take up immediate appointment as a qualified GP, and some may not take up appointment at all.

Mr. Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many GPs took maternity leave in each of the last three years; what percentage of them have not yet returned to work afterwards; and if he will make a statement. [3409]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested is not held centrally.

Trench Foot

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many incidents of trench foot were reported in the United Kingdom in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [3408]

Ms Jowell: The table gives, for the most recent five years for which data are available, the estimated number of finished consultant episodes (FCEs: ordinary admissions and day cases combined) in National Health Service hospitals in England with a primary diagnosis of trench foot:

	FCEs
1990–91	4
1991–92	4
1992–93	4
1993–94	5
1994–95	2

Source:
Department of Health, Hospital Episode Statistics (HES).

Trench foot varies in severity and in many cases there will not have been any hospital in-patient treatment.

Hospital Closures

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list, by region, the cottage and community hospitals which are currently subject to proposals for closure; and if he will make a statement. [3407]

Mr. Boateng: It is difficult to define comprehensively what is meant by "community" or "cottage" hospital. They differ from place to place in the scale, range and volume of services they offer. What characterise nearly all of them is that they provide a local service and admit patients under the care of a general practitioner. The list has been compiled on that basis and shows hospitals that are currently, or have recently been, the subject of local consultation about full closure.

Anglia and Oxford

None.

North Western

Ulverston Hospital, Ulverston

North Thames

None.

Northern and Yorkshire

None.

South Thames

Battle Hospital, Battle

Eversfield Hospital, St. Leonard's-on-Sea

South West

Belmont Hospital, Tiverton

Lynton Community Hospital[1]

Odiham Cottage Hospital

Winsford Community Hospital[1]

Trent

None.

West Midlands

None.

[1] Temporary closures.

Food Poisoning

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how much his Department has spent on research into food poisoning in each of the last five years, broken down to show the funds dedicated to *(a)* E.coli, *(b)* campylobacter and *(c)* salmonella; [3612]

(2) how much his Department has budgeted for research into food poisoning in 1997–98, broken down to show the funds dedicated to *(a)* E.coli, *(b)* campylobacter and *(c)* salmonella. [3613]

Ms Jowell: Funding for food poisoning research comes principally from the Department's Microbiological Food Safety surveillance and research budget (1997–98 allocation £2.3 million), supplemented by further amounts from the Department's general research and development budget and through core funding of the Public Health Laboratory Service and the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research. The total budget allocation, and expenditure before 1993, could only be derived at disproportionate costs.

Information on funding since the 1993–94 financial year is given in the table;

Camplyobacter, E. Coli and Salmonella research and surveillance expenditure funded from DH budgets[1]

£1,000

Financial Year	*Campylobacter*	*E. Coli*	*Salmonella*
1993–94	399	185	523
1994–95	405	397	391
1995–96	702	459	603
1996–97	673	884	332
1997–98[2]	472	978	334

[1] Excluding PHLS core funding.
[2] Amount committed to spend through current contracts.

The Department of Health is also funding the Intestinal Infectious Diseases study which is currently expected to cost a total of £2.6 million. This study involves *Campylobacter, E.coli* O157 and *Salmonella* as well as other pathogens. Additionally, there are other projects funded by the Department which involves research/surveillance into two or more pathogens. Although these include *Campylobacter* or *E.coli* O157 or *Salmonella* because other pathogens are involved the cost of these projects is not included in the above table. The Department of Health intends to place more research and surveillance contracts which will receive funding during the current financial year.

Non-emergency Treatment

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what powers NHS trust hospitals have to refuse non-emergency treatment; and what checks are operated to ensure that such powers are exercised reasonably. [4148]

Mr. Milburn: We will continue to give priority to meeting emergency needs. We look to the National Health Service to plan carefully to meet this duty while minimising the need to cancel non-emergency work.

Under the current arrangements it is for health authorities and general practitioner fundholders, taking into account local needs, to agree what care should be provided and to set and monitor contracts with NHS trusts. Where changes are proposed, for example to respond to changing local circumstances, these should be discussed and agreed between the parties. Decisions on the admission of individual patients are for the clinicians concerned.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Correspondence

Mr. Miller: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will publish the latest figures showing the volume of correspondence received by Ministers and agency chief executives from hon. Members, the targets set for reply and the percentage of replies sent within target. [4273]

Mr. Kilfoyle: It has been customary to publish these figures annually. I attach therefore a table setting out the correspondence figures for the 1996 calendar year. The table also sets out the figures for 1995, first published on 20 June 1996, *Official Report,* columns *526–30.* Members' attention is drawn to the footnotes which accompany the table and which provide general background information on how totals have been calculated.

Correspondence from Members of Parliament to Ministers and Agency Chief Executives

	1995			*1996*		
Department or Agency	*Target set for reply (working days)*	*Number of letters received*	*Percentage of replies within target*	*Target set for reply (working days)*	*Number of letters received*	*Percentage of replies within target*
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	15	8,533	68	15	10,645	62
Cabinet Office (OPS)	15	1,526	76	15	1,067	63
Crown Prosecution Service	15	118	81	15	92	91
Ministry of Defence	15	7,109	75	15	5,897	66
—Army Technical Support Agency	—	—	—	15	11	100
—Defence Analytical Services Agency	—	—	—	10	14	93
—Defence Evaluation and Research Agency	7	103	76	10	377	74
—Defence Postal and Courier Service	15	13	100	15	12	100
—Disposal Sales Agency	15	15	100	15	10	100
—Duke of York's Royal Military School	3	17	100	3	11	100
—Meteorological Office	—	—	—	15	16	70
—Naval Recruiting and Training Agency	—	—	—	15	10	100
—Pay and Personnel Agency	—	—	—	10	25	84
Department for Education and Employment	20	8,111	87	20	[1]16,774	88
—Employment Service	15	1,306	97	15	1,044	98
—Teachers' Pensions' Agency[2]	10	95	100	10	59	98
Department of the Environment	15	18,138	52	15	14,395	[3]52
—Planning Inspectorate Agency	8	593	89	8	481	84
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	10	7,364	90	10	[4]9,756	95
Department of Health	20	16,121	79	20	11,376	87
—NHS Pensions Agency	20	81	84	15	46	70
HM Customs and Excise	18	4,9[illegible]	68	18	4,303	63
Home Office	15	11,556	26	15	12,072	32
	25	12,327	51	[5]25	10,371	57
—HM Prison Service	15	2,564	76	15	2,911	89
—UK Passport Agency	15	101	86	[6]10	245	87
Inland Revenue	18	4,746	47	[7]18	3,914	41
	23	336	49	[8]23	682	85
—Valuation Office	23	221	48	[9]23	256	46
	15	31	51	[10]15	53	73
Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers	15	359	75	15	[11]515	76
Lord Chancellor's Department	20	4,641	81	20	2,876	[12]68
—Court Service	20	985	46	20	1,217	93
—HM Land Registry	20	63	100	20	53	98
—Public Record Office	—	—	—	10	12	92
—Public Trust Office	15	45	98	15	113	100
Department of National Heritage	18	3,834	95	18	5,476	81
—Historic Royal Palaces Agency	10	16	100	10	19	100
—Royal Parks Agency	10	20	80	10	29	86

Correspondence from Members of Parliament to Ministers and Agency Chief Executives

Department or Agency	1995 Target set for reply (working days)	1995 Number of letters received	1995 Percentage of replies within target	1996 Target set for reply (working days)	1996 Number of letters received	1996 Percentage of replies within target
Northern Ireland Office (including	10	4,237	64	[11]10	[1]4,195	52
Northern Ireland Departments)	15	1,857	80	[14]15	[1]2,094	72
—Child Support Agency	10	73	74	10	69	86
—Compensation Agency	10	94	99	10	77	100
—Northern Ireland Prison Service	10	54	83	10	127	99
—Planning Service	—	—	—	15	163	99
—Rate Collection Agency	—	—	—	5	19	100
—Roads Service	—	—	—	15	91	100
—Social Security Agency	10	41	63	10	75	87
—Water Service	—	—	—	15	52	92
Office for National Statistics	—	—	—	10	[15]199	54
Overseas Development Administration	15	3,941	96	15	3,508	94
Scottish Office	17	5,874	49	17	5,226	61
—Historic Scotland	17	39	95	17	59	93
—Scottish Office Pensions Agency	17	11	100	17	31	97
—Scottish Prison Service	17	81	84	17	112	99
—Student Awards Agency for Scotland	17	61	95	17	120	97
Department of Social Security	20	19,645	71	20	[16]18,091	74
—Benefits Agency	20	2,689	89	20	[17]2,175	98
—Child Support Agency	20	5,554	63	20	9,110	62
—Contributions Agency	20	304	48	20	[16]395	61
—War Pensions Agency	20	1,117	100	20	1,283	99
Department of Trade and Industry	10	18,505	72	10	[1]5,483	74
—Companies House	10	44	85	10	48	100
—Insolvency Service	10	29	100	10	42	98
—Patent Office	10	17	100	10	26	100
—Radiocommunications Agency	10	38	100	10	23	100
Department of Transport	15	19,427	65	15	15,929	66
Coastguard Agency	—	—	—	15	27	78
DVLA	7	402	99	7	373	100
Driving Standards Agency	15	122	94	15	273	91
Highways Agency	15	665	84	15	662	98
Marine Safety Agency	15	18	100	15	16	94
Vehicle Inspectorate	15	42	98	15	37	97
HM Treasury	15	7,761	62	15	[1]4,331	57
Welsh Office	12	2,987	82	12	2,989	80
CADW (Welsh Historic Monuments)	12	46	93	10	35	97

Notes on 1996 Figures[19]

[1] Includes all Ministerial replies, not only those letters to Members of Parliament.

[2] The Teacher's Pensions Agency became part of the Capita Group on 1 October 1996.

[3] 71 per cent. of letters were replied to within 20 working days.

[4] In addition, the FCO's Migration and Visa Department received 6,196 letters direct from MPs in 1996. 78 per cent. of these were replied to within the 15 working day target.

[5] The 25 working day target is for replies on Prison Service, UK Passport Agency and Immigration and Nationality Department subjects. The figures include letters sent direct to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate Board. The 15 day working day target is for all there subjects.

[6] Target time reduced from 15 working days to 10 working days with effect from 26 February 1996.

[7] Head Office figures.

[8] Local Office and "delegated" figures (where local officials reply direct to MPs).

[9] Letters from MPs where the Chief Executive has replied on behalf of Treasury Ministers.

[10] Letters from MPs sent direct to the Chief Executive.

[11] This figure excludes letters received by the Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers which were subsequently replied to by the Director of Public Prosecutions.

[12] The apparent decline in performance is accounted for by a change in the method of calculation.

[13] Replies signed by the Minister.

[14] Replies signed by the Private Secretary to the Minister.

[15] Includes 165 letters where the Chief Executive replied on Ministers' behalf.

[16] Excludes letters replied to by the Chief Executive of the Contributions Agency on behalf of Ministers.

[17] In addition, the Benefits Agency replied to 18,556 letters from MPs sent direct to local offices, 91 per cent. of which were replied to within the 20 working day target.

[18] Includes letters from MPs to Ministers where the Chief Executive has replied on Ministers' behalf.
[19] The 1995 figures are taken from the *Official Report*, 20 June 1996, columns 526–530. Please also refer to notes given with that reply. In addition the following Departments and Agencies received between 1 and 10 letters from Members of Parliament during 1996 but are not shown in the table:
—ADAS, Central Science Laboratory, Meat Hygiene Service, Veterinary Laboratories Agency (MAFF);
—Central Office of Information, Property Advisors to the Civil Estate, The Buying Agency (Cabinet Office);
—Army Base Repair Organisation, Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency, Army Personnel Centre, Defence Bills Agency, Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency, Defence Secondary Care Agency, Defence Transport and Movements Executive, Military Survey, MOD Police Agency, Naval Bases and Supply Agency, Naval Manning Agency, RAF Maintenance Group Defence Agency, Service Children's Education Agency (MOD);
—Medical Devices Agency, Medicines Control Agency (Health);
—Government Property Lawyers, Serious Fraud Office, Treasury Solicitors Department (Attorney General);
—Construction Service, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency, Environment and Heritage Service, Land Registers of Northern Ireland, Rivers Agency, Training and Employment Agency, Valuation and Lands Agency (NIO and NI Departments);
—Scottish Court Service, Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency (Scottish Office);
—Information Technology Services Agency (DSS);
—National Weights and Measures Laboratory (DTI).

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the average cost of training a new magistrate for *(a)* criminal work, *(b)* youth court work, *(c)* family court work and *(d)* licensing court work. [3720]

Mr. Hoon: No figures are collected nationally on the cost of training newly appointed law magistrates or the cost of training magistrates when they are first appointed to serve on the youth, family or licensing panels.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what are the running costs per hour of the magistrates court *(a)* at Ripon, *(b)* at Harrogate, *(c)* at Skipton, *(d)* in North Yorkshire as a whole and *(e)* in England and Wales as a whole. [3717]

Mr. Hoon: The average running cost per court sitting hour in North Yorkshire in 1996 was £225.67, and in England and Wales as a whole was £272.84. The information requested is not available at PSD level.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the average length of service of magistrates *(a)* on the Ripon bench, *(b)* in North Yorkshire and *(c)* in England as a whole. [3721]

Mr. Hoon: The average length of service of magistrates on *(a)* the Ripon Bench is 12 years and *(b)* in North Yorkshire is 10 years; *(c)* information covering England and Wales as a whole could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate he has made of the additional costs to the Probation Service following the proposed closure of Ripon Liberty magistrates court resulting from *(a)* travel to and from Harrogate court, *(b)* the possible increase in the number of adjournments and *(c)* additional time spent travelling. [3725]

Mr. Hoon: None. Magistrates' courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of the magistrates' courts committee (MCC). Closure decisions are for the MCC to determine, although a contributing local authority may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1979. In the absence of an appeal the Lord Chancellor has no locus in the matter.

Whilst a consultation process has been undertaken on possible closures, North Yorkshire MCC has made no determination to close any courts, at this time.

Ripon Court

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate he has made of *(a)* the additional costs to defendants following the proposed closure of Ripon Liberty magistrates court resulting from (i) travel to and from Harrogate court and (ii) the possible increase in the number of adjournments and *(b)* the additional time spent by defendants (1) travelling and (2) waiting; and what assessment he has made of the difficulties defendants and witnesses living in outlying townships would face in reaching Harrogate court by public transport in time for the start of business. [3724]

Mr. Hoon: None. Magistrates' courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of the magistrates' courts committee (MCC). Closure decisions are for the MCC to determine, although a contributing local authority may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1979. In the absence of an appeal the Lord Chancellor has no locus in the matter.

Whilst a consultation process has been undertaken on possible closures, North Yorkshire MCC has made no determination to close any courts, at this time.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the average number of cases listed for hearing in the criminal court at Ripon on a Wednesday in the past year; and what proportion involved defendants living within the current Ripon Liberty petty sessional division. [3728]

Mr. Hoon: The information requested is not available in its entirety and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. However, in a survey carried out throughout some of North Yorkshire's rural courts in October and November 1996, 62 per cent. of the 99 criminal cases completed at Ripon involved defendants who lived in the Ripon Liberty PSD. There are no statistics available to show the average number of cases which were listed.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many townships are covered by the Ripon Liberty petty sessional division. [3719]

Mr. Hoon: There are only two "townships" in the Ripon Liberty PSD: Ripon (population c. 15,500) and Pately Bridge (population 2,000).

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate he has made of the additional costs to magistrates following the proposed closure of Ripon Liberty magistrates court resulting from *(a)* travel to and from Harrogate court and *(b)* adjournments resulting from defendants failing to appear; and what assessment he has made of the additional time magistrates would spend travelling. [3723]

Mr. Hoon: None. Magistrates' courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of the magistrates' courts committee (MCC). Closure decisions are for the MCC to determine, although a contributing local authority may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1979. In the absence of an appeal the Lord Chancellor has no locus in the matter.

Whilst a consultation process has been undertaken on possible closures, North Yorkshire MCC has made no determination to close any courts, at this time.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the impact of closure of Ripon court on applicants seeking emergency powers in family proceedings. [3727]

Mr. Hoon: None. Magistrates' courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of the magistrates' courts committee (MCC). Closure decisions are for the MCC to determine, although a contributing local authority may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1979. In the absence of an appeal the Lord Chancellor has no locus in the matter.

Whilst a consultation process has been undertaken on possible closures, North Yorkshire MCC has made no determination to close any courts, at this time.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what were *(a)* the average sitting hours per courtroom and *(b)* the percentage change in those hours at Ripon magistrates court during the period 1993 to 1996; and what were the equivalent figures for magistrates courts in North Yorkshire as a whole. [3731]

Mr. Hoon: The information is given in the table.

Average sitting hours per courtroom and percentage change in Ripon Magistrates' court and North Yorkshire

	1993	*1994*		*1995*		*1996*	
	Hours/ courtroom	*Hours/ courtroom*	*Percentage change over last year*	*Hours/ courtroom*	*Percentage change over last year*	*Hours/ courtroom*	*Percentage change over last year*
Ripon Magistrates Court	139	144	4	269	87	257	–5
North Yorkshire MCC	361	371	3	400	8	418	5

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what percentage of defendants appearing at Ripon court were local in the most recent year for which figures are available; and what was the equivalent figure for courts in North Yorkshire as a whole. [3729]

Mr. Hoon: Figures for a full year are not readily available as these are not routinely collected. A substantive answer may only be produced at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate he has made of the additional costs to the police following the proposed closure of Ripon Liberty magistrates court resulting from travel to and from Harrogate court *(a)* as witnesses and *(b)*, pursuant to executing warrants. [3715]

Mr. Hoon: None. Magistrates' courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of the magistrates' courts committee (MCC). Closure decisions are for the MCC to determine, although a contributing local authority may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1979. In the absence of an appeal the Lord Chancellor has no locus in the matter.

Whilst a consultation process has been undertaken on possible closures, North Yorkshire MCC has made no determination to close any courts, at this time.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many townships within Harrogate district are not in the Ripon Liberty petty sessional division; and what consideration is being given to extending Ripon Liberty petty sessional division to cover nearby townships. [3718]

Mr. Hoon: Four townships, from the area covered by Harrogate Borough Council, do not lie within the Ripon Liberty PSD.

Decisions on proposed PSD boundary changes are made by the Lord Chancellor pursuant to an application from the relevant MCC. Whilst a consultation process has been undertaken with a view to amending some boundaries locally, no final decision has been made and my Department holds no application for change at this time.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the annual cost of paying for clerks to travel from Ripon to Harrogate following the closure of the administration office at Ripon court. [3722]

Mr. Hoon: The annual cost of paying home to work mileage allowance to the two members of staff whose posts were transferred to Harrogate, since the Ripon Magistrates' Court Office closed in September 1995, has been in the region of £2,000.00.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate he has made of the additional costs to the legal aid system following the

proposed closure of Ripon Liberty magistrates court resulting from *(a)* travel to and from Harrogate court by Ripon solicitors, *(b)* the possible increase in the number of adjournments, *(c)* solicitors having to spend additional time travelling, *(d)* increased waiting time for solicitors and *(e)* defendants' costs. [3726]

Mr. Hoon: None. Magistrates' courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of the magistrates' courts committee (MCC). Closure decisions are for the MCC to determine, although a contributing local authority may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1979. In the absence of an appeal the Lord Chancellor has no locus in the matter.

Whilst a consultation process has been undertaken on possible closures, North Yorkshire MCC has made no determination to close any courts, at this time.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the cost of running Ripon Magistrates Court as a percentage of the North Yorkshire Magistrates Court Committee's total budget for buildings in the last financial year; and what is the estimated figure for the present financial year. [3730]

Mr. Hoon: No figures are collected nationally on the running costs of individual magistrates courts buildings. The North Yorkshire Magistrates' Courts Committee estimate that the premises running costs of the Ripon Courthouse for 1996–97 were £6,200 or 1.6 per cent. of total premises running costs.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much money he estimates would be saved by the closure of Ripon Liberty Magistrates Court. [3716]

Mr. Hoon: I have made no estimate. Magistrates' courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of the magistrates' courts committee (MCC). Closure decisions are for the MCC to determine, although a contributing local authority may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1979. In the absence of an appeal the Lord Chancellor has no locus in the matter.

Whilst a consultation process has been undertaken on possible closures, North Yorkshire MCC has made no determination to close any courts, at this time.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate he has made of the additional costs to the Crown Prosecution Service following the proposed closure of Ripon Liberty Magistrates Courts resulting from *(a)* travel to and from Harrogate Court, *(b)* the possible increase in the number of adjournments and *(c)* additional time spent travelling. [3714]

Mr. Hoon: None. Magistrates' courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of the magistrates' courts committee (MCC). Closure decisions are for the MCC to determine, although a contributing local authority may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1979. In the absence of an appeal the Lord Chancellor has no locus in the matter.

Whilst a consultation process has been undertaken on possible closures, North Yorkshire MCC has made no determination to close any courts, at this time.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what are the projected future costs of compensating clerks who have been moved from Ripon to Harrogate for home to work travel expenses following the proposed closure of Ripon Court. [3808]

Mr. Hoon: I have made no estimate. Magistrates' courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of the magistrates' courts committee (MCC). Closure decisions are for the MCC to determine, although a contributing local authority may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1979. In the absence of an appeal the Lord Chancellor has no locus in the matter.

Whilst a consultation process has been undertaken on possible closures, North Yorkshire MCC has made no determination to close any courts, at this time.

Croydon County Court

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will ensure that an urgent investigation is carried out into the loss by Croydon County Court of evidence sent by Mr. Gary Osborn to Croydon County Court in March and May 1997 relating to case CR 75 00 67. [4085]

Mr. Hoon: The question concerns a matter which has been assigned to the Court Service under the terms of its framework document. I have therefore asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Michael Huebner to Mr. Paul Burstow, dated 17 June 1997:

PQ 98/124: Loss of evidence at Croydon County Court

The Parliamentary Secretary of the Lord Chancellor's Department has asked me to reply to your Question about the loss by Croydon County Court of evidence sent by Mr. Osborn. The evidence to which you refer is a defence to civil proceedings brought against your consistuent.

I have asked my officials to look into the concerns you raise and will write to you as soon as the investigation is complete.

TREASURY

Internet

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact on Government revenues of the increase in use of the Internet; and if he will make a statement. [3193]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government are examining the tax implications of increased use of the internet in close consultation with other Governments, at OECD and in other fora, and with the business community.

Taxation

Mr. Townend: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his target for the overall burden of taxation as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product. [3356]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government's fiscal policy is directed at reducing borrowing. The intention is that, over the economic cycle, the government borrow only to finance public investment and not to fund current expenditure. Public debt as a proportion of national income is held at a stable and prudent level. Forecasts and projections of the tax burden will be published int he Red Book on 2 July.

Windfall Tax

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what calculations the Treasury has made as to the effect on average household bills for *(a)* gas, *(b)* telephone services, *(c)* water and *(d)* electricity of a windfall tax on the profits of privatised utilities. [3680]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer will be considering a wide range of factors in reaching his view on the windfall tax. Household bills are affected both by demand and price: where services are subject to price caps, these are a matter for the regulators.

Interest Rate

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 3 June, *Official Report*, column *147*, if he will make a statement defining numerically what constitutes lasting economic stability for the financial years *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, and *(c)* 1999–2000. [3335]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: Lasting economic stability is built on prudent economic management and sound finance. The Government regard price stability as an essential pre-condition for high and stable levels of growth and employment. The Chancellor set out his inflation target in the remit to the Monetary Policy Committee on June 12 which can be obtained from the House of Commons Library. Sound public finances are also important for lasting economic stability. The Government's fiscal policy will be spelt out in the Budget on July 2, along with forecasts and projections for Government borrowing.

Growth Rate

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to increase the underlying growth rate of the British economy. [3327]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The Government are setting up a framework to deliver lasting economic stability which is an essential pre-condition for high and stable levels of growth and employment. The Government also aim to rebuild British economic strength with a modern industrial base, high levels of investment and a culture of entrepreneurship that will unlock British economic potential.

Gross Domestic Product

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the impact on tax revenues of a 1 per cent. increase in gross domestic product. [3443]

Dawn Primarolo: The estimate reported in Treasury Occasional paper No. 4, "Public Finances and the Cycle", is that a one per cent. increase in output relative to trend increases tax revenues by over $1\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. a year later. This estimate is of course subject to a margin of error and the precise effect on tax revenues will depend in part on the composition of the increase in GDP.

Taxes

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the average level of tax raised from all sources of taxes, per capita in the last year for which statistics are available. [2253]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* In 1995–96 the average level of total taxes and National Insurance contributions per capita was £4,370, compared with an average level of £1,526 in 1980–81. The average level in 1980–81 in 1995–96 prices was £3,309.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the average delay in the publication of statistics on income and tax after the end of each annual exercise in the collection of statistics; and if he will make a statement. [2254]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* The Inland Revenue publishes an annual volume entitled Inland Revenue Statistics which includes a large variety of different statistics on income and tax. Updated figures are usually available on request in advance of publication and each section of Inland Revenue Statistics includes details of when new figures are likely to become available and how they can be obtained.

Pornographic Material

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what criteria are used by HM Customs and Excise for seizing pornographic material being imported into the United Kingdom. [3396]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* The question of whether an item is indecent or obscene is a matter for the Courts. Customs seek to prohibit material which cannot lawfully be traded in the UK and would be in breach of the Obscene Publications Act 1959 or the Protection of Children Act 1978.

Customs Officers are issued with guidance which covers the type of activity that is likely to be considered by the Court's to be indecent or obscene.

Speeding

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the feasibility of allowing local authorities to retain the money that is derived from fining speeding motorists and hypothecating that money to local authorities to further discourage traffic speeding through increased traffic policing. [3007]

Mr. Michael: It is for highway and police authorities to decided on the appropriate level of resources to devote to speed enforcement, in accordance with their priorities. Hypothecating the revenue from speeding fines would result in expenditure on traffic enforcement being determined by the income generated, rather than the relative priority of the activity.

Assisted Places Scheme

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what expenditure savings have been budgeted by the Treasury for *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99 as a result of the proposed abolition of the assisted places scheme. [3642]

Mr. Byers: I have been asked to reply. I refer the hon. Member to the answer that I gave to the hon. Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) on 5 June, *Official Report*, column *245*.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Inward Investment

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library his Department's briefing for inward investors on the improvement in industrial relations and the reduction in days lost in strikes since the winter of 1978–79. [3454]

Mr. Fatchett: No current published inward investment material contains reference to the reduction in days lost in strikes since 1978–79.

This Department's Invest in Britain Bureau has produced a promotional leaflet "Britain—The Preferred Location". A copy of this document has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Gibraltar

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if it is his policy that liberalisation of Gibraltar airport is an integral part of the completion of the single market. [3996]

Mr. Doug Henderson: In the absence of any agreement over the airport, Gibraltar has been suspended, since 1987, from EC air liberalisation measures. We are prepared to consider any practicable proposal for the development of the airport.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Market Testing

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what further market testing she expects to be conducted in her Department. [3997]

Clare Short: There are no plans for market tests but future efficiency reviews will consider each of the alternative options for improving value for money including the scope for competition.

Vanuatu

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what provision she has made for future development aid for Vanuatu; and if she will make a statement. [3998]

Clare Short: British aid to Vanuatu is provided under a regional programme for the Pacific. The future level of all our programmes will be considered this year in our Departmental spending review.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Tourist Boards

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will review the funding of the British Tourist Board and regional tourist boards. [3162]

Mr. Tom Clarke: My Department's direct financial support for the domestic tourism industry is provided through the English Tourist Board, which in turn funds the ten non-statutory Regional Tourist Boards for the delivery of its national programmes. Funding for the promotion of Britain overseas is directed through the British Tourist Authority.

I shall be considering the funding for the English Tourist Board, and for the British Tourist Authority, alongside that for all the other areas for which I am responsible, in due course.

Seaside Resorts

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will take steps to promote British seaside resorts *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* abroad. [3164]

Mr. Tom Clarke: Breaking New Ground identified the promotion of traditional tourist destinations as a priority for the English Tourist Board, to help them achieve the standards visitors now demand. In promoting Britain abroad, the British Tourist Authority seeks to identify groups of consumers most likely to be persuaded to come to Britain and to build its campaigns, like Waterfront Britain, which promotes holidays in coastal regions, around their interests.

Rail Privatisation

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage, pursuant to his answer of 9 June, *(Official Report* column *311*, if he will review the effect of the sale of British Rail International on British tourism. [3693]

Mr. Tom Clarke: My Department has no plans at the moment to review the effect of the sale of British Rail International Ltd. on British tourism.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Vibration White finger

Mr. Clapham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when her officials last met British Coal to discuss the progress made to date with the introduction of a no faults liability scheme for former miners suffering from vibration white finger. [1697]

Mr. Battle: I understand from British Coal that, over recent years, they have received 12,000 or so claims from former staff that they now suffer from vibration white finger, a condition whose symptoms include blanching and tingling in the fingers. A trial of a small number of "lead" cases, to help establish any liability the Corporation might have, began in Autumn 1995, was taken to the Court of Appeal in Autumn 1996, and resumed in Newcastle this Spring. Departmental officials have been kept abreast of developments, as DTI provides

the necessary finance for British Coal's activities and will be directly responsible for their management when the liability is transferred from the Corporation at the end of the year. I understand that some unlitigated claims are being settled on a normal common law basis, but that no proposals for a "no fault" scheme are under discussion.

Credit Rating System

Mr. Cotter: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to review the credit rating system; and what steps she intends to take to ensure that people who have cleared their debts or people who have had unsettled debts of more than six years distant are able to obtain loans on the same terms as others. [2640]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: I am always keeping under review representations made to me about credit reference agencies, as is the Director General of Fair Trading, along with other aspects of the Consumer Credit Act and developments in the consumer credit field.

Windfall Tax

Mr. Cotter: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps she will take to protect consumers from bill increases which may result from the proposed windfall tax on utility companies. [2639]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer expects to announce the arrangements for the proposed windfall tax in the summer budget on 2 July.

Small Businesses

Mr. Cotter: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps she will take to promote British exports from small businesses. [3955]

Mr. Ian McCartney: My noble Friend the Minister for Trade announced on 22 May his intention to establish an Export Forum, with representation from business as well as from Whitehall. The Forum will review existing official export promotion activities and make recommendations for a new export initiative.

Fossil Fuel Subsidies

Mr. Dafis: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the advantages of decreasing Government subsidies to fossil fuel industries. [3019]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* The Government do not pay any direct subsidies to the fossil fuel industries.

EU and Government Grants

Mr. Hinchcliffe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps she will take to promote services, provided by Government and local government, to businesses on grant provided by European Union and United Kingdom Government. [3270]

Mrs. Roche: Companies have access to impartial advice on grant availability through their local Business Links in England, and through equivalent networks in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Local authorities are partners in Business Links.

Newsagents

Ms Walley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what estimate she has made of the number of professional newsagents in operation *(a)* currently and *(b)* in each of the last five years. [4174]

Mr. Battle: This information is not available from official sources.

Defence Industry (Redundancies)

Mr. Burns: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assistance her Department will make available to employees of Marconi Communications in Chelmsford who have been made redundant to help them retrain and get back into work; and if she will make a statement. [3783]

Mr. Roche *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* Representatives of local partners and Marconi Communications are meeting today to develop an action plan in response to the redundancies.

The local partners represented at the meeting include: Essex County Council, Chelmsford Borough Council, Essex Training and Enterprise Council, Business Link Essex, The Employment Service, Essex Careers and Business Partnerships Ltd. and the Government Office for Eastern Region.

The Action Plan will build on national programmes such as the Training for Work Scheme for the long-term unemployed and assistance available from the European Union Structural Funds under the Konver II initiative for diversifying the economic base of areas heavily depending on the defence industry.

Essex Training and Enterprise Council and the Employment Service have already agreed to allow Marconi employees immediate access to the Government's Training for Work Programme waiving the normal qualifying period of six months unemployment.

Further measures being considered for the Action Plan include advice and guidance, training course, help with job search and assistance to individuals and groups interested in starting their own businesses.

Mr. Burns: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what help she will make available to defence-related companies in the Chelmsford area to diversify into non-military activities to offset redundancies in the defence industry. [3785]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* Small and medium sized enterprises in the Chelmsford area are eligible to apply for grants from European Union Structural Funds under the Konver II initiative to assist diversification from defence-related activities.

Pneumoconiosis Scheme

Mr. Clapham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when her officials last met British Coal to discuss progress with the current review of the Coal Industry pneumoconiosis scheme. [1696]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 2 June 1997]:* I understand that British Coal are currently well advanced in negotiations with the mining trades unions about revisions to their pneumoconiosis compensation scheme (PCS). Departmental officials have been kept abreast of the discussions, as DTI provides the necessary finance for British Coal's activities and will be directly responsible for their management when the liability is transferred from the Corporation at the end of the year. This "no-fault" scheme is an alternative to common law litigation for former miners who had ten years in the coal industry and who have been certified by a DSS Medical Board as having pneumoconiosis. It provides a faster and cheaper means of obtaining compensation, with lump sums being awarded according to the severity and starting date of the condition, and weekly payments made in appropriate cases to compensate for loss of earnings.

Zaire (Exports)

Mr. Goggins: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the export credit guarantees given by the British Government to private companies in order to promote exports to Zaire since 1967. [2572]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 11 June 1997]:* Apart from a specific project during the 1980's with an insured value of £29.7 million, cover has not been available from ECGD for exports to Zaire since early 1975.

However, between 1967–75 and the specific project in the 1980's, the number of different companies involved means that it is not practicable or cost-effective to provide detailed information by company.

DEFENCE

Jamaica, Trinidad and Belize

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assistance his Department currently provides to the Governments of (i) Jamaica, (ii) Trinidad and (iii) Belize; and what assistance he is proposing to provide in each case over the next three years. [3043]

Dr. Reid: Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Belize all benefit from training in the UK subsidised either by the Foreign and Commonwealth Offices's United Kingdom Military Training Assistance Scheme (UKMTAS) or by my Department's Defence Military Assistance Fund. In addition, an exercise which provides training for the Jamaican Defence Force takes place in Jamaica and the UK each year. Exercises also take place from time to time in Trinidad and Tobago. Loan Service Personnel are currently based in Belize and visits by Short Term Training Teams also take place. No firm decisions have been taken beyond the current year, but we would expect assistance to continue to be provided to all three countries.

Departmental Sites (Disposal)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which sites under the ownership of his Department are currently in the process of disposal; and to what extent environmental, social and community factors have been taken into account in respect of each disposal. [3280]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Estate Organisation. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from B. L. Hirst to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 17 June 1997:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about Ministry of Defence sites currently in disposal as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Estate Organisation.

There are approximately 400 sites currently in disposal, ranging in size from individual garages to complete RAF stations. Although the circumstances of each disposal are different, we always endeavour to address the environmental, social and community factors associated with the disposals, particularly through the local planning process.

If your are concerned with a particular site or sites in disposal, I would be happy to provide you with the specific details of the case.

Scottish Service Personnel

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the number of Scottish service personnel whose last address was in Scotland and who are currently serving elsewhere in the United Kingdom. [3198]

Mr. Spellar: The information held on this subject is limited. For the Army and RAF, it is estimated that there are 961 personnel who were born in Scotland, whose previous Service address was in Scotland and who are currently serving elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Information on Navy personnel is not held in a form which enables an estimate to be made.

Eurofighter Aircraft

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what military threats the possession of Eurofighter aircraft is designed to combat; and what other options his Department has considered for these purposes. [3631]

Mr. Spellar: In an uncertain world where we face a variety of risks to British interests and where highly sophisticated combat aircraft are widely available, we need the flexible multi-role capability that Eurofighter will provide. Eurofighter will be able to contribute both to achieving air superiority and to ground attack operations. The need for both these capabilities has been demonstrated by recent operations in the Gulf and Bosnia.

The alternative aircraft considered were the F-15, F-16, F-18, F-22, Rafale and Gripen.

Vacant MOD Homes

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the average rent being paid for empty homes under the leaseback arrangement with Annington Homes in Birmingham and the west midlands. [3646]

Mr. Spellar: The average annual rent being paid to Annington Homes for homes in Birmingham is £5,100 and in the west midlands is £4,890.

Dr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the addresses of empty MOD homes in *(a)* Birmingham and *(b)* west midlands county, and the length of time each has been empty. [3645]

Mr. Spellar: My Department owns eight properties with a postal address of Birmingham, of which four are currently empty. In addition there are 43 other properties with a west midlands address (excluding Birmingham) of which 20 are currently empty. It is our practice not to give the addresses of individual properties for security reasons.

The longest time any one of these houses has been empty is 17 months, but the average is six to seven months.

Land Rover Patrol Vehicles

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Land Rover patrol vehicles purchased for use by Britain's armed forces; how many were provided with general purpose machine guns and 40 millimetre grenade launchers; and who supplied these weapons. [3591]

Mr. Spellar: Thirty-nine Land Rover patrol vehicles were purchased in 1985. All the vehicles are equipped with the mounting to fit either the general purpose machine gun (GPMG) or 40mm Grenade launchers. The GPMG was purchased from Royal Ordnance—then Royal Ordnance Factory—Enfield in the 1960s and 1970s and the 40mm Grenade launcher was purchased from Sidem (UK) Ltd. in 1990.

Defence Exports

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what guidelines exist concerning the provision by *(a)* serving and *(b)* former armed forces personnel of military, police, security services and equipment to other countries; and what assessment he has made of these guidelines. [3686]

Mr. Spellar: All armed forces personnel are subject to Queen's Regulations, lifelong duties under the Official Secrets Act 1989 and, where applicable, individual operating instructions for specific tasks. Additionally, personnel serving under the operational or administrative command of the Director Special Forces are required to sign a confidentiality contract.

Former armed forces personnel are subject to the Official Secrets Act and under Queen's Regulations all Service officers must obtain the approval of the Ministry of Defence before accepting, within two years of leaving the Service, an offer of employment or a consultancy with a defence contractor or foreign government.

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the minutes of meetings and other documents relating to meetings between his Department's Defence Export Services Organisation personnel and officials of *(a)* Procurement Services International and *(b)* Greys Defence Systems Ltd. [3685]

Mr. Spellar: The Defence Export Services Organisation's mission is to provide British defence exporters with the strongest possible Government support within the framework of the defence, security and foreign policies of the Government of the day. As with many other companies, DESO has had regular contact with the Greys Group, which includes both Procurement Services International and Greys Defence Systems Ltd. Details of meetings between DESO and its customers cannot be released due to their commercial confidentiality.

I am withholding the information requested under exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Electric Shock Equipment

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if *(a)* the Royal Ordnance Factories and *(b)* other United Kingdom defence manufacturers are currently producing equipment designed for, or that could be used for, the application of electric shocks to individuals under interrogation in foreign countries; and if such equipment will receive an export licence. [2294]

Mr. Michael: I have been asked to reply.

The manufacture of weapons which discharge electric shocks is prohibited under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968 (as amended) except with the authority of the Secretary of State. No company currently holds authority for the manufacture of weapons of this kind. The export of such weapons is also controlled under the terms of the Export of Goods (Control) Order. The Government will not permit the export of arms to regimes which might use them for internal repression or international aggression.

NATO (Nuclear Plans)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if NATO's nuclear protection will extend to external threats to the new entrant countries from Eastern Europe. [3914]

Dr. Reid: The security safeguards provided by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, including the supreme guarantee of security provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, applies to all members of NATO and will continue to do so.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish NATO's nuclear plans. [3928]

Dr. Reid: NATO's nuclear forces are not targeted at any country. It is the practice of all Allies not to reveal details of the Alliance's contingency nuclear planning. To do so would damage the Alliance's deterrence posture.

Former POWs

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of *(a)* the cost of reimbursing former prisoners-of-war whose salary was reduced while detained at prisoners-of-war camps and *(b)* the number of people entitled to such reimbursement. [3913]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) on 11 June, *Official Report*, column *485*.

Friend or Foe Identification System

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about his plans to provide the armed forces with a modern identification friend or foe system. [4526]

Mr. Spellar: The UK Armed Forces are to be equipped with a new sophisticated electronic question and answer system so that they can distinguish between friendly and potentially hostile forces for the foreseeable future.

The new system, known as Successor Identification Friend or Foe (SIFF), will replace existing IFF equipments on a wide range of ships and aircraft and on certain air defence installations. It will be compatible with those of our NATO allies. As well as protecting our forces from inadvertent attack by their own side, SIFF will improve their prospects of avoiding detection by hostile units and increase their ability to detect and engage such units, thus ensuring interoperability for the foreseeable future. SIFF will also be compliant with new flight safety rules mandated by the Civil Aviation Authority for all aircraft operating in civilian controlled airspace.

Because SIFF equipment will be fitted to over 50 types of platform, the programme will require very careful planning. Following extensive studies, we have decided to invite competitive tenders for an initial integration study and planning phase, phase 1 of the programme, following which a prime contractor will be selected. The prime contractor will be responsible for the supply and installation of SIFF equipments during the implementation phase of the programme, phase 2. In parallel with this competition, contracts will be placed with the companies who are the platform design authorities to enable them to evaluate and cost the SIFF integration task. It is planned that the competitive invitation to tender for phase 1 of the programme will be issued in July. The total value of the programme phase 1 and phase 2 is estimated to be in the order of £500 million, providing substantial work for British industry.

Scottish Personnel

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the number of service men and service women normally resident in Scotland who are serving with *(a)* the Royal Navy, *(b)* the Army and *(c)* the Royal Air Force. [3200]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Analytical Services Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Paul Altobell to Mr. Michael Fallon, dated 17 June 1997:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence requesting an estimate of the number of Scottish servicemen and servicewomen normally resident in Scotland who are serving with (a) the Royal Navy, (b) the Army and (c) the Royal Air Force. This falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of Defence Analytical Services Agency.

Unfortunately, the information requested is not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. I am sorry I could not be more helpful on this occasion.

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Anti-drugs Policy

43. **Mr. Rhodri Morgan:** To ask the President of the Council what arrangements she has made to improve the co-ordination of anti-drugs policy. [2328]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Government will appoint an anti-drugs supremo to co-ordinate action against drugs across all Government Departments and key agencies. She or he will report directly to me as Chairman of the Cabinet's co-ordinating committee on drugs misuse. All relevant Departmental interests across the UK are represented on this Committee.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Staff (Telephone Calls for Members)

36. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the right hon. Member representing the House of Commons Commission how much time is spent by House staff answering or making external phone calls to or from hon. Members. [2321]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: Records are not kept of the time spent by staff of the House answering or making external calls to or from hon. Members.

Division Procedures (Reform)

37. **Mr. Rendel:** To ask the President of the Council what estimate she has made of the cost of introducing electronic voting in the House. [2322]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I have made no such estimate although the Modernisation Committee has asked the Clerk and the Serjeant at Arms to look at both short and long term solutions.

38. **Mr. William O'Brien:** To ask the President of the Council what representations she has received on reform of the Division procedures in the House; and if she will make a statement. [2323]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I have received a number of representations on this subject. Division procedures fall within the terms of reference of the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons, which may wish to look at them in due course.

Lockerbie

39. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the President of the Council if she will move to set up a Select Committee to examine the issues arising from the destruction of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie. [2324]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I have no plans to do so.

Procedures and Administration (Reform)

40. **Mr. Bayley:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement about the reform of House of Commons procedures and administration. [2325]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Government have a clear manifesto commitment to parliamentary reform.

The Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons, which I chair, has now begun the task of considering how the practices and procedures of the House should be modernised. I hope the Committee will be able to bring forward its initial recommendations on improving the scrutiny of legislative proposals before we rise for the summer.

The administration of the House is a matter for Madam Speaker, the House of Commons Commission, the various domestic committees, and for the House Departments.

Select Committees

41. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the President of the Council what proposals she has to improve the effectiveness of Select Committees. [2326]

42. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on the future of the Select Committee system. [2327]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I hope the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons will bring forward recommendations relating to Select Committees in due course.

Security Staff (Incident)

Mr. Mullin: To ask the hon. Member representing the House of Commons Commission what action has been taken following the incident in New Palace Yard in November in which a member of the security staff was injured; and if she will make a statement. [2752]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Security Officer concerned is an employee of the Metropolitan police and the matter was fully reported and investigated at the time.

I understand that there is a strong possibility of litigation following the incident. It would therefore be inappropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

Life Support Training

Dr. Harris: To ask the hon. Member representing the House of Commons Commission how many of the staff employed in the Palace of Westminster are trained in *(a)* basic and *(b)* advanced life support. [3219]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: There are 57 members of staff employed in the Palace of Westminster trained in basic first aid. In addition to this there are 79 police officers, 99 security officers and 26 fire officers.

There are three members of staff employed in the Palace of Westminster trained in advanced life support.

SCOTLAND

Scottish Constituencies (Voter Numbers)

15. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the average electorate in Scottish constituencies. [2343]

Mr. Henry McLeish: I refer the hon. Member to the oral answer that I gave to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton).

Government Expenditure

16. **Mr. Whittingdale:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the Government expenditure per head in Scotland in the current financial year; and if he will make a statement. [2344]

Mr. Dewar: Identifiable General Government Expenditure per head in Scotland was £4,614 in 1995–96, the last year for which complete figures are available.

Tobacco-related Deaths

17. **Mr. Davidson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps he intends to take to reduce tobacco-related deaths in Scotland. [2345]

Mr. Galbraith: We will publish later this year a White Paper which will set out our strategy for tackling smoking, together with draft legislation to give effect to our Manifesto commitment to ban tobacco advertising. The development of our strategy will be informed by an anti-smoking summit in London in July, which I shall be attending and which will bring together British and International experts in the field of smoking reduction.

Unemployment

18. **Ms McKenna:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received regarding measures to reduce long-term and youth unemployment in Scotland using receipts from the windfall tax. [2346]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend has received representations from a wide range of interests supporting our proposals for Welfare to Work. Many organisations wish to become involved in furthering our initiative.

Highlands and Islands

19. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action he will take to promote the economy of the highlands and islands in the next year. [2347]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend will pursue a range of policies aimed at diversifying the economy of the Highlands and Islands so that people living in the area can play their part in the economic and social development of the entire country.

Higher Education

20. **Miss Anne Begg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the postponement of Higher Still. [2348]

Mr. Wilson: Higher Still will bring important improvements to school and college education in Scotland. The full benefit to our young people can be only be achieved if lecturers and teachers in the classroom are fully prepared. The revised start date of 1999 with the Advanced Higher following on in 2000 will allow time for the necessary preparation. It will also allow planning of the implementation of Higher Still in close consultation and partnership with all those involved.

Scottish Parliament (Running Costs)

21. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the cost of running a separate parliament in Scotland; and if he intends this sum to be raised exclusively from Scottish tax payers. [2349]

Mr. McLeish: It is not possible to provide an estimate of the annual running cost of a Scottish Parliament as a number of decisions on the Parliament have yet to be made. The White Paper to be published before the Summer Recess will set out our detailed proposals.

Under Government accounting arrangements it is not possible to identify separately those services funded by particular groups of tax payers.

Food Standards

22. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to improve food standards in Scotland. [2351]

Mr. Galbraith: The Government consider food safety to be of paramount importance. That is why we have accepted all the recommendations of the Pennington Report. We are also committed to establishing an independent Food Standards Agency.

Public Bodies

23. **Mr. Canavan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps he is taking to make the membership of public bodies more representative and publicly accountable. [2352]

Mr. Dewar: We are committed to fully implementing the Nolan recommendations. I am considering with colleagues how this might best be taken forward.

Devolution Bill

24. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will include a restriction on the rights of Scottish Members of Parliament to vote on English policy matters in his Devolution Bill for Scotland. [2353]

Mr. McLeish: As Scottish Members of Parliament will continue to retain a major interest in proceedings to be decided at Westminster I have no plans to restrict their voting rights.

Nursery Vouchers

26. **Mr. Desmond Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to phase out the use of nursery vouchers. [2355]

Mr. Wilson: We are doing away with vouchers as soon as possible. Our first concern has been to protect parents who are relying on funding at quality centres for the coming school year, and whose arrangements need to be in place by the time schools close for the summer, the week after next. For their sake, having looked carefully at all the options, I issued vouchers on a once-only basis last week, as a basis for grant payments over the 1997–98 school session. No further voucher issues will be made. And I have simplified procedures radically—for example, getting rid of the need for nearly 1,000,000 signatures on vouchers by pre-school staff.

We are now moving on to put in place by August 1998 a new funding system, characterised by partnership and planning, which will provide a quality pre-school place by the winter after next for every child in the pre-school year in Scotland. I shall launch a major consultation on proposals in the autumn. In the meantime I intend during the summer to announce a number of interim measures to support expansion and quality improvement in the pre-school sector.

Council House Sales

27. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will establish an inquiry into the practice of tenants selling council houses which they have purchased from local authorities, applying for another council house, purchasing that house from the local authority, and repeating the self-same actions for profit; and if he will make a statement. [2356]

Mr. Chisholm: My right hon. Friend has not received any correspondence on the practice of recurring purchases of council houses under the right-to-buy legislation and subsequent resales on the open market. He will, however, examine carefully any evidence which the hon. Member holds.

Low Pay

28. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to meet the Low Pay Commission to discuss low pay in Scotland. [2358]

Mr. Wilson: None at present. The independent Low Pay Commission will be consulting on issues relating to the introduction of the minimum wage, including low pay, with employers, employees and other interested parties, and will then make recommendations to Government.

Scottish Health Trusts

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his plans to amalgamate Scottish health trusts. [2354]

Mr. Galbraith: I announced to Trust Chairmen on 30 May that I intend to take early action to reduce the number of Trusts where the opportunity arises. I also said that I would expect any reconfiguration of the network of Trusts in Scotland to be founded on the development of clinical links between hospitals, and between hospitals and primary care.

Discussions are taking place amongst some Trusts about the possibilities for merger and I await the outcome of those discussions with interest.

Fish Quotas

Mr. Doran: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland on how many occasions inspectors from his Department stopped and checked overland consignments of fish from other ports to the fish market at Aberdeen and Peterhead, in the last year for which figures are available; and on how many occasions charges were brought for breaches of quota legislation. [3654]

Mr. Chisholm: The subject of this question relates to matters undertaken by the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency. I have asked the Agency's Chief Executive, Mr. Paul Du Vivier, to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from P. E. Du Vivier to Mr. Frank Doran, dated 17 June 1997:

CHECKING OF OVERLAND CONSIGNMENTS OF FISH TO THE FISHMARKETS AT ABERDEEN AND PETERHEAD

Mr. Malcolm Chisholm has asked me to reply to your question about the checking of overland consignments of fish to the fishmarkets at Aberdeen and Peterhead.

In the 12 month period to 31 May 1997, the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency's Sea Fisheries Inspectorate staff stopped vehicles and checked overland consignments of white fish which were being transported to the fishmarkets of Aberdeen and Peterhead on 1670 occasions.

No reports were made to the Procurator Fiscal as a consequence of these checks.

Food Poisoning

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when the Government will publish its response to the Pennington report on the recent outbreak of E. coli 0157; and if he will make a statement regarding any outstanding issues from his Department's previous consideration of the report. [3609]

Mr. Galbraith: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland to the hon. Member for Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) on 11 June, *Official Report*, column *440*.

Service Personnel

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will estimate the number of Scottish service men and service women normally resident in Scotland who are currently serving outside Scotland. [3197]

Mr. Spellar: I am replying as this is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Analytical Services Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Paul Altobell to Mr. Michael Fallon, dated 17 June 1997:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence requesting an estimate of the number of Scottish servicemen and servicewomen normally resident in Scotland who are currently serving outside Scotland since this falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of Defence Analytical Services Agency.

Unfortunately, the information you require is not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. I am sorry I could not be more helpful on this occasion.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Welfare to Work

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many young people he estimates will benefit from his welfare to work proposals in the constituency of Bolton, West. [3082]

Mr. Alan Howarth: It is not possible to give an accurate estimate of the numbers who will benefit from the New Deal over the period of its implementation. All young people who are eligible, or who become so, will be offered opportunities to participate in a job, training or useful work experience.

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many young people aged between 18 and 24 years he estimates will benefit from his welfare to work proposals in the parliamentary constituency of Greenock and Inverclyde; and if he will make a statement. [3462]

Mr. Howarth: It is not possible to give an accurate estimate of the numbers who will benefit from the New Deal over the period of its implementation. All young people who are eligible, or who become so, will be offered opportunities to participate in a job, training or useful work experience.

Special Needs

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to increase employment for people with learning and physical disabilities; and if he will fund work schemes for such people. [3145]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Government are committed, in partnership with interested parties, to an equal opportunities policy which will improve employment opportunities for all disadvantaged groups including disabled people, regardless of the nature of their disability. It is our intention to establish comprehensive and enforceable civil rights legislation for disabled people against discrimination in society or at work. People with disabilities will also be afforded opportunities under employment and training initiatives, including our welfare to work proposals.

Media Advice Notes for Schools

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the cost to the Funding Agency for Schools of publishing Media Advice Notes for Schools; and if he will make a statement. [3674]

Mr. Byers: This matter is the responsibility for the Funding Agency for Schools. I have asked the Chairman of the Funding Agency to arrange for a reply to be sent to the hon. Member.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he proposes to encourage unemployed people to pursue education and training courses without affecting their entitlement to the jobseeker's allowance; and if he will direct job centres to operate a more flexible approach. [3927]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We will keep this issue under review as we develop our Welfare to Work reforms.

In April this year the Workskill Pilots were introduced in four areas to evaluate more flexible arrangements for people to undertake employment-related education and training while receiving the Jobseeker's Allowance. We will wish to evaluate carefully the outcome of the Pilots.

Single Parents

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of

10 June, *Official Report*, column *366*, what estimates have been made to date of the costs of providing additional support to single parents at job centres. [3949]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We are considering a number of alternatives as we develop our Welfare to Work plans. At this early stage it is not possible to give a firm estimate of the likely costs.

Swimming Lessons

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will introduce compulsory swimming lessons and water survival skills in the curriculum. [4130]

Ms Estelle Morris: Swimming is part of the National Curriculum for physical education for primary school pupils. It may be taught at either or both of the primary key stages but, by the age of 11, pupils should have been taught to swim unaided, competently and safely, for at least 25 metres, and the principles and skills of water safety and survival. For pupils at secondary schools, swimming is an optional element of the National Curriculum. Where schools do choose it, pupils must be taught additional strokes and a variety of water-based activities, including rescue and resuscitation skills.

Schools (Police)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the number of times police have had to be called to schools for each local education authority in each of the last three years. [4039]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not collected centrally.

Teachers' Pensions and Early Retirement

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement of his review of teachers' pensions and early retirement. [4038]

Mr. Byers: Consultation on further changes designed to enhance the flexibility of teachers' pension arrangements and on proposals for a longer term review of the Teachers' Superannuation Scheme ended on 9 June. My right hon. Friend will make an announcement about these matters in due course.

Building Society Conversions (Discrimination)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will investigate whether the policy adopted by building societies converting to banks has contravened the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. [3603]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Whether the DDA has been contravened by building societies converting to banks is an issue which can be decided only by the courts.

The Building Societies (Distributions) Act 1997 deals with any society which first announces its intention to convert after 22 January 1997. Its provisions require converting societies to act to protect the interests of beneficiaries of accounts held on behalf of others, including disabled people. The National Disability Council has opened a dialogue with societies who announced their conversion plans before that date to explore the options for a solution that would have the effect that disabled people would not be worse off than other members.

On 10 March 1997, the Alliance and Leicester announced that, after flotation, its board would be asked to consider making

"an appropriate charitable donation to disabled persons, or a charity or charities on their behalf, subject of course to the approval of the company's shareholders".

I hope that other converting societies will be similarly constructive.

National Vocational Qualifications

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how he will ensure that the National Professional Qualification for Headship accords with the National Vocational Qualification System; and if he will make a statement. [3959]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government have asked the Teacher Training Agency to look at the links between the National Professional Qualification for Headship and National Vocational Qualifications, including the Management Charter Initiative's revised management standards.

Schools (Asbestos)

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment his Department has made or commissioned of the risk to school teachers and pupils from the crumbling of materials containing asbestos in schools; and if he will make a statement. [4210]

Mr. Byers: Local education authorities and school governors in voluntary aided and grant maintained schools have the statutory responsibility for the fabric of their buildings and the health and safety of pupils and employees while they are on the premises.

The Department's Architects and Building Branch, the Department of the Environment and the Health and Safety Executive provide them with detailed guidance on asbestos, including advice on how to assess risks, and on other building-related issues.

Training and Enterprise Councils

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to transfer the functions currently undertaken by training and enterprise councils to democratically accountable bodies. [4147]

Dr. Howells: Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) are accountable through Ministers to Parliament under the terms of their contracts with the Government. They are also required to follow the "Framework for the Local Accountability of Training and Enterprise Councils in England and Wales" published by the TEC National Council following consultations with government and other interested parties. We will work with the TEC movement to review how this Framework is working and to secure improvements in the way TECs account to their local communities.

Schools (Transfer Ages)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on what dates *(a)* his Department received the formal application from Buckinghamshire LEA for changes to the age of transfer between schools, *(b)* his Department began and ended its period of consultation about that application and *(c)* he expects to announce a decision on that application. [4146]

Ms Estelle Morris: There are a number of proposals under consideration; from Buckinghamshire LEA in respect of county schools, and from the governors of voluntary aided, voluntary controlled and grant maintained schools. Buckinghamshire published its proposals on 4 October 1996. Some proposals were published by voluntary schools on 6 December 1996. The objection period on the latest set of proposals ended on 6 February 1997. Our consideration of the proposals will take full account of all the education issues involved. My right hon. Friend expects to be in a position to announce a decision very soon.

Pupil-specific Data

Mrs. Gillian Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost to public funds of the collection of pupil-specific data for children resident in local education authorities not covered by interim early years development plans. [4151]

Mr. Byers: The collection of pupil specific information for children attending maintained provision, resident in Local Education Authorities not covered by interim Early Years Development Plans, is essential to protect public funds from the risk of double funding. We are confident that the costs will be less than those of administering the nursery education voucher scheme.

Nursery Provision

Mrs. Gillan Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost to local education authorities of informing parents and providers about the nursery arrangements applying in their areas. [4152]

Mr. Byers: The responsibility for, and cost of, informing parents and providers about the nursery arrangements for 1997–98 continues to fall to DfEE. The extent to which LEAs enhance this information will be for them to decide in the light of local circumstances.

School Children (London)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will list by borough, the number of primary school age children living within London boroughs attending state schools in other boroughs; and if he will identify the borough in which they are educated; [3175]

(2) if he will list, by borough, the number of primary school age children educated within London boroughs living beyond the Greater London boundary; and if he will identify the borough they are educated in; [3176]

(3) if he will list, by borough, the number of secondary school age children living within London boroughs attending state schools in other boroughs; and if he will identify the borough in which they are educated; [3177]

(4) if he will list, by borough, the number of secondary school age children educated within London boroughs living beyond the Greater London boundary; and if he will identify the borough in which they are educated. [3178]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 12 June 1997]:* A copy of the Departmental survey as at January 1996 containing this information will be placed in the Library, together with notes of guidance.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Income Support

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement on delays in dispatching notifications in respect of income support claimants to local authorities for the administration of housing benefit and council tax benefit. [623]

Mr. Frank Field: One of our key aims is to improve the service provided to claimants and other customers. The effectiveness of these arrangements will be reviewed shortly. As the administration of Income Support is a matter for the Benefits Agency, I have asked its Chief Executive, Peter Mathison, to write to the hon Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Dr. Lynne Jones, dated 16 June 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking about the delays in despatching notifications in respect of Income Support claimants to local authorities for the administration of housing benefit and council tax benefit.

The issue of housing benefit notification is an integral part of the existing benefit claim clearance targets. Additionally, Benefits Agency (BA) District Managers and Local Authority (LA) Benefit Managers sign up to an agreed annual level of service which is based on a model national Service Level Agreement. The national model includes agreed quantifiable performance targets. A grievance procedure is included in the document should there be matters that cannot be resolved through normal liaison channels. The SLA provides the framework within which both parties can work together and voice their concerns, should either fail to meet the agreed levels of service.

A number of BA internal audits within the last year have highlighted a certain lack of support and co-operation by both parties in adhering to local agreements which will have led to delays in some cases.

The BA is committed to improving working relations with LAs and is aware of representations by the LA Associations about the effectiveness of some of the current local arrangements. These will be reviewed in the coming months.

You will be interested to know that the BA in Birmingham have a Research and Development Team which examines existing processes with the aim of improving performance. They have recently commenced a Housing Benefit Project to examine the way information is exchanged between the BA and LA with the aim of identifying new processes to reduce any delays.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Bronchitis and Emphysema

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claimants in each coalfield area to date have applied for an award for chronic bronchitis and emphysema under the provisions which came into force on 9 April. [1702]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is set out in the table.

We are encouraging the take-up of benefits and have recently launched a major advertising campaign to highlight the changes in Industrial Injuries Benefit which will particularly help ex-coal miners with chronic bronchitis and emphysema who could be between £30 and £80 a week better off.

New claims to industrial injuries disablement benefit for chronic bronchitis and emphysema in the period 9 April to 30 April 1997 by BA area directorates

Benefits agency area directorate	*Number of claims received*
East of Scotland	205
West of Scotland	130
Tyne Tees	474
Yorkshire	1,405
Greater Manchester	96
North West Coast	42
Wales	1,189
West Midlands	88
Mercia	1,036
West Country	5
London South	30
Chilterns	0
East London and Anglia	1
Total—Great Britain	4,701

Notes:

The figures in the table are taken from a 100 per cent. count of claims received by Benefits Agency Area Directorate.

Source:

Benefits Agency BREM data.

Asbestos (Teachers)

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many awards have been made to school teachers for asbestos-related disease, including posthumous awards, in each region of the United Kingdom since 1990. [4209]

Mr. Denham: There are four asbestos-related diseases that are prescribed for benefit purposes. A record of the occupation of successful claimants at the onset of the diseases is only available since 1995. The data indicate that there was one award to a teaching professional in 1995 (for mesothelioma, in South West England) and one in 1996 (for asbestosis, in the North of England). Awards for asbestos-related diseases for all occupations totalled 1,327 in 1995 and 1,317 in 1996. Separate information on posthumous awards is not collected.

Changes made in April implemented in full the recommendations of the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council concerning industrial injuries benefit for asbestos-related diseases. These involved an extension of the occupational criteria for mesothelioma with the aim of encouraging more people with the disease to claim and qualify for benefit if they were exposed in any job to a level of asbestos above that commonly found in the environment at large.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Anglo-Irish Secretariat

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make it her policy to collate information on briefings requested by the Irish side of the Anglo-Irish Secretariat at Maryfield and make such information available to hon. Members. [1318]

Marjorie Mowlam: I intend henceforward to place, on a quarterly basis, in the Library of the House a list of the subjects on which briefings have taken place in the Anglo-Irish Secretariat involving officials of the Northern Ireland Office and those of Northern Ireland Departments. The first report will cover the period from May to July. Details of such exchanges will, however, remain confidential to the two Governments.

Multi-party Talks

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much money had been received from the Irish Government to cover the costs of the multi-party talks up until the adjournment; and what sums are outstanding. [2019]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Irish Government are bearing an equal share of the running costs of the multi-party talks, excluding any in respect of Strand One.

During the period 10 June 1996 to 28 February 1997, under this agreement, the Irish Government have been invoiced for, and has paid, a total of £740,057.30 sterling. The breakdown is as follows:-

	£
June 1996	67,519.61
July 1996	117,785.19
August 1996	53,009.28
September 1996	57,966.45
October 1996	104,778.07
November 1996	60,556.79
December 1996	118,886.95
Janaury 1997	79,316.29
February 1997	80,238.67
Total	740,057.30

The Irish Government's share of costs for March 1997, for which they are currently being invoiced and will include any outstanding amounts not available for inclusion in previous invoices, is £98,088.85.

Departmental Documents

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage and how many documents in 1996 she estimates were *(a)* passed on to the Public Record Office intact, *(b)* passed on to the Public Record Office in censored form, *(c)* retained by his Department in full, *(d)* retained by his Department in part, *(e)* destroyed, *(f)* otherwise disposed of and *(g)* otherwise unaccounted for. [2520]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 11 June 1997]:* No Northern Ireland Office records were passed to the Public Record Office in 1996. The earliest Northern Ireland Office documents will be due for transfer to the Public Record Offices when they become 30 years old in the year 2002. The suitability of those documents for permanent preservation will be reviewed under the terms of the Public Records Act 1958 and/or the Public Records Act (NI) 1923. Neither Act requires statistics to be kept in the form requested. The Chief Executive of the Public Records Office for Northern Ireland has written to you with such information as he has as he has available. To comply with their duties under the Acts the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Departments make arrangements for the safe keeping of their records, with a view to their eventual release to the public. The general arrangements for extended closure or retention of public records as set out in Chapter 9 of the White Paper Open Government of July 1993 (Cm 2290) apply in Northern Ireland.

Letter from A.P.W. Malcomson to Mr. Norman Baker, dated 10 June 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recently tabled Parliamentary Question about the percentage and number of documents which in 1996 were (a) passed on to the Public Record Office intact, (b) passed on to the Public Record Office in censored form, (c) retained by her Department in full (d) retained by her Department in part, (e) destroyed, (f) otherwise disposed of and (g) otherwise unaccounted for.

The place of deposit for the records of the Northern Ireland Departments is the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, where separate transfer arrangements operate, namely under the Public Records Act (NI) 1923.

In 1996, a total of 200 linear metres of records (equating to about 7,000 files) were transferred to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Court Service. No records were retained in whole or in part by the Departments.

There would be prohibitive cost involved in compiling statistics for the percentages and numbers of documents destroyed. There is no mechanism in Northern Ireland for the disposal of records other than by transfer to the Public Record Office in Northern Ireland.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Illegal Arms Decommissioning

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what conclusion she has reached as to the willingness of the parties to the peace process to reach an agreement on the decommissioning of illegally held arms; and if she will make a statement. [4149]

Marjorie Mowlam: I believe it should now be possible, in the light of extensive discussion in the multi-party talks, to resolve the question of decommissioning on terms which are broadly acceptable to the talks participants. The Independent Chairmen have been working towards a resolution of the issue, and we have ourselves made intensive efforts, in consultation with the parties and the Irish Government. I hope that proposals can be put forward very soon, and that they will be agreed so as to permit a start to substantive negotiations no later than September.

WALES

Preventive Medicine

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what measures he proposes to advance preventive medicine. [1157]

Mr. Win Griffiths: There are many initiatives under way to prevent ill health.

Primary prevention initiatives including the Welsh Child Health Surveillance programmes play a vital role in monitoring the health and development of children. They help to prevent illnesses, particularly, childhood infectious diseases. Indeed, the childhood vaccination and immunisation programme represents one of the most effective public health interventions currently available. At very little cost, life long protection can be provided against infectious diseases—the health burdens of which can be enormous.

Health education also has a role to play. This is the responsibility of Health Promotion Wales. Health Promotion Wales are responsible for co-ordinating national campaigns dealing with a full range of health promotion issues including smoking, diet, physical activity, substance misuse and healthy sexual behaviour. Their work is complemented by specialist health promotion services commissioned by health authorities; by staff working in the primary and community health services; and by national voluntary agencies.

Additionally, a range of legislation is in place to control the incidence of food-borne diseases and the Government are committed to protecting the public health through additional measures to ensure the safety of food, including the establishment of a Food Standards Agency.

Secondary prevention measures including the early detection of breast and cervical cancers, for example, through screening programmes available in Wales have significantly improved chances of survival from these diseases.

We have set a list of targets to improve the health of the people of Wales. These include reducing deaths from cancer of the lung, breast and cervix. Other target areas include coronary heart disease and stroke. We have also asked health authorities to draw up plans to reduce accident and suicide rates and to work to improve the quality of life of patients with a number of painful conditions.

All these initiatives, both existing and proposed, will continue to be afforded a high priority to ensure that we provide the greatest possible health benefits for the people of Wales and ensure that health strategies are responsive to the needs of the local population.

Mature Students

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of *(a)* how many and *(b)* what percentage of those studying for (i) undergraduate degrees and (ii) equivalent vocational qualifications in Wales are mature students; and if he will make a statement. [2734]

Mr. Hain: There are no direct equivalencies between undergraduate degrees and vocational qualifications. The following table provides an analysis by qualficiation aim of those studying at undergraduate level in HE institutions in Wales in 1996–97.

Undergraduate students in higher education establishments[1] in Wales 1996–97

Qualification aim	*Mature student[2]*	*All students*	*Per cent. mature*
First degree	23,039	51,757	44.5
Professional qualifications	1,194	1,213	98.4
Diploma/Certificate in HE	2,916	3,155	92.4
HND/HNC	4,986	8,466	58.9
NVQ/SVQ levels 4 and 5	52	52	100.0
Institutional credit	1,077	1,318	81.7
Foundation course	271	401	67.6
Other undergraduate	6,337	6,839	92.7
Total	39,872	73,201	54.5

[1] Excludes HE in FE establishments.
[2] Students aged 21 or over in the current academic year.

Llanelleu Bridge

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the safety of pedestrians on the A4042 over Llanelleu Bridge, near Abergavenny. [2525]

Mr. Hain: The Department regularly reviews all sections of trunk road with regard to road safety. No traffic accidents have ever been recorded at this site.

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals his Department has to construct a pedestrian bridge alongside the Llanelleu Bridge, near Abergavenny. [2529]

Mr. Hain: Given the low level of pedestrian use, the provision of a footbridge is not justifiable in the light of information I have received on other priorities, but the Department has offered to joint fund up to 50 per cent. of the projected cost of such a bridge.

Workers Education Association

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement about future financial support for the Workers Education Association. [3274]

Mr. Hain: Under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, the North and South Wales districts of the Workers' Educational Association are further education institutions designated as eligible to receive funding support from the Further Education Funding Council for Wales. It is for the FEFCW to determine the allocation of funding to reach district of the WEA in Wales, though I value its important work.

Poverty

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he is taking to reduce poverty in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [3149]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The Government are determined to tackle the underlying causes of poverty in Wales, working with local government, business and the voluntary sector. In addition to wider measures to reform the benefits system and our policies on welfare to work, which will address both youth and adult unemployment and target areas of high unemployment, developments will include encouragement of regeneration programmes for the communities in greatest need; a Bill to release capital receipts to allow the building of new houses and the rehabilitation of old ones; targeting areas of low educational achievement; new approaches to childcare; approaches to improving health which recognise the impact of poverty; and promoting the involvement of local communities in identifying their needs and developing strategies to address them.

World Environment Day

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what events were *(a)* sponsored and *(b)* publicised by his Department to mark World Environment Day on 5 June. [3821]

Mr. Win Griffiths: At a ceremony held at the Welsh Office I marked World Environment Day by announcing the establishment of a Coastal Forum for Wales, and by presenting blue flags to be flown at nine beaches on the Welsh coastline to the local authorities which had successfully applied for these prestigious awards.

Nevill Hall Hospital

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what companies comprised the private consortium in the private finance initiative for the Red Barn development at Nevill Hall Hospital, Abergavenny. [3931]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The private consortium comprised of:

Bovis Crown Gap

Bovis Building Management

RCO Support Services Ltd.

Council House Sales

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what has been the total amount of council house sales receipts in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* the former Alyn and Deeside district council; and if he will make a statement. [3599]

Mr. Win Griffiths *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* The total amount of council house sales receipts for the former Alyn and Deeside district council, and for Wales as a whole, is given in the following table. The period covers the inception of the right-to-buy-scheme in 1981, up to the abolition of the former district and borough councils in 1996. Receipts covered by the new capital finance system, introduced on 1 April 1990, are shown separately.

We will consult shortly on proposals for the release of set-aside housing capital receipts.

£ thousand

	1 April 1981 to 31 March 1990	1 April 1990 to 31 March 1996	Of which: Usable	Of which: Reserved[1]
Alyn and Deeside	11,600	7,618	3,047	4,571
Wales	662,242	323,764	123,220	200,544

[1] Under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, authorities are required to set aside a proportion of capital receipts as provision to meet credit liabilities ("the reserved part").

Food Poisoning

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) how much his Department has spent on research into food-poisoning in each of the last five years, broken down to show the funds dedicated to *(a)* E. coli, *(b)* campylobacter and *(c)* salmonella; [3610]

(2) how much his Department has budgeted for research into food-poisoning in 1997–98, broken down to show the funds dedicated to *(a)* E. coli, *(b)* campylobacter and *(c)* salmonella. [3611]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The majority of research in this area is funded by the Department of my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Health and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The Welsh Office is, however, funding three concurrent studies to evaluate the detection and routine investigation of sporadic food poisoning in Wales and to identify possible risk factors for infection. Total funding of £128,000 is available with £53,000 budgeted to be spent in 1997–98.

Compulsory Competitive Tendering

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals he has for allowing local government not to proceed with current compulsory competitive tendering. [3995]

Mr. Win Griffiths: My right hon. Friend announced on 2 June, *Official Report*, column *32–3* his proposals for extending the current moratorium on compulsory competitive tendering in Wales. The Welsh Office is consulting local government, private sector contractors and other interested parties on a proposed revised timetable for implementation.

It is important that the pressure for greater efficiencies is maintained while the Government's review of compulsory competitive tendering takes place and prior to the broader approach to achieving effectiveness and efficiency based on best value principles being introduced. My right hon. Friend has therefore asked Welsh councils to take a positive view on the benefits of voluntary competitive tendering and to conclude properly those tendering exercises which are nearing completion.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

ENVIRONMENT AND THE REGIONS

Agricultural Waste

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to bring waste which arises on agricultural premises within the definition of controlled waste. [3075]

Angela Eagle: The Department of the Environment's Annual Report for 1997 (Cm 3607) set out the previous Government's plans for the next three years. The report stated in paragraph 6.35 that in 1997–98 the Department's plans included:

"(v) issue draft regulations on extending waste management controls to certain agricultural and mining/quarrying waste for public consultation."

The Government plan to fulfil this commitment.

New Forest

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what the controlling authority will be of the proposed New Forest Heritage Area; [3143]

(2) when the New Forest Heritage Area boundaries will be formally approved; [3141]

(3) if he will make a statement on the statutory status of the New Forest Heritage Area. [3142]

Mr. Raynsford: The boundary of the New Heritage Forest has been delineated through the statutory local plan process and therefore has the force of section 54A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. I understand that the relevant local plans defining the Heritage Area have been adopted by the local planning authorities, but that the boundary in respect of two areas of land, in the Avon Valley and north of Totton, is being reviewed in the context of the emerging New Forest District Local Plan. For the purposes of the town and country planning legislation, the controlling authorities are the local planning authorities within whose administrative areas the Heritage Area lies. These authorities, together with other public bodies with particular responsibilities for the New Forest, are represented on the non-statutory New Forest Committee which has the purpose of assisting the co-ordination of their activities.

Since July 1994, the New Forest Heritage Area has been subject to the same national planning policies as would have applied had the area been designated a national park. These policies will have been reflected in development control decisions and statutory development plans made by the local planning authorities.

Construction Work (Engineering Contracts)

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what undertakings to the construction industry Her Majesty's Government have given as to the use by Her Majesty's Government of the new engineering contract in construction work. [3428]

Mr. Raynsford: Best practice guidance to Government departments on construction procurement lists the NEC Engineering and Construction Contract as one of the standard forms of contract which departments may choose.

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what use his Department is making of the new engineering contract in construction work for which it is responsible. [3430]

Mr. Raynsford: The NEC Engineering and Construction Contract has not so far been used for construction contracts by the former Departments of the Environment and Transport. An announcement will be made shortly concerning future use of the NEC by the Highways Agency.

Environmental Policy

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received in respect of women and sustainable development in preparation for Earth Summit II; and if he will make a statement. [3746]

Angela Eagle: My Department has received 202 representations on Earth Summit II, many of which covered issues affecting women. The National Federation of Women's Institutes, Soroptimist International and Gender 21 submitted detailed representations on women's issues.

Nuclear Waste Disposal

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Government will rule out any investigation of site 6 as a location for the disposal of nuclear waste. [3600]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* There are no plans to commence investigations there or elsewhere, nor are there grounds on which to exclude any site from further consideration.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the impact of newspaper reports claiming to identify site 6 for the disposal of nuclear waste on the blighting of property in the area identified. [3647]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* Since there are no plans to commence investigations there or elsewhere, I have no wish to comment on the impacts of speculative newspaper reports of this kind.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what geological conditions his Department requires for the underground storage of nuclear waste material; and if these conditions would be satisfied at the Stanta training area near Thetford. [3456]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* It is for the Environment Agencies to decide on a case by case basis whether particular proposals meet the safety requirements for radioactive waste disposal. I have no information about whether these requirements would be met by particular sites.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions whether matters of planning blight have been taken into account in the decision to refuse to reveal the location of site 6. [3601]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* I can confirm that such matters have been taken into account.

English Partnerships

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the budget of English Partnerships for 1997–98. [4006]

Angela Eagle: English Partnership's budget for 1997–98 is £298,779,000 made up of £202,779,000 grant in aid from my Department with the remainder being receipts generated by the Agency. English Partnerships also receive grant-in-aid in respect of work on the Greenwich Peninsula.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people were employed by English Partnerships on 6 May. [4005]

Angela Eagle: The number of permanent and contract staff employed by English Partnerships on 6 May was 383 as follows:

Region	*Number of staff*
Corporate offices	96
North-east	55
North-west	71
Yorkshire and Humberside	48
Midlands	47
South-east	35
South-west	31
Total number of staff	383

Wild Boar

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the establishment of a feral population of wild boar in the south-west of England; and what plans he has to tighten the licensing procedures for the farming of wild boar. [3922]

Angela Eagle: Whilst there have been anecdotal reports of wild boar in Dorset and Hampshire, I am unaware of any substantiated evidence of a population having become established.

The keeping of wild boar is covered under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 which requires any person keeping a wild boar to obtain a licence from the local authority. I have no plans to change the licensing procedures under the Act.

Business Rates

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to reform business rates, to reduce the burden on small businesses. [3957]

Mr. Raynsford: We are aware of the concerns of small businesses regarding non-domestic rates and will take them into account as we develop our policies. We will consult widely before making any changes to the system.

Housing (Energy Efficiency)

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the average energy efficiency rating for housing in England; and if he will provide a breakdown by *(a)* local authority, *(b)* private sector and *(c)* housing association dwelling, on the latest available estimates. [3307]

Mr. Raynsford: The latest available estimates (from the 1991 English House Condition Survey) show the average energy efficiency rating for occupied housing in England to be 35, measured on the Government's Standard Assessment Procedure. The average SAP ratings of local authority, private sector and housing association dwellings are 34, 36 and 35 respectively. The figure for private sector dwellings reflects an average of 37 for owner occupied and 22 for private rented dwellings.

District Councils

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what will be the electoral timetable for those councils which are to be based on changed boundaries following the review of district council bandings. [3650]

Mr. Raynsford: Changes to shire district ward boundaries, for those districts with a system of whole council elections, are implemented on the first ordinary day of elections after the making of the Order which gives effect to the changes. For those councils that elect by thirds, our practice is to provide in the Order for the holding of whole council elections on the next convenient ordinary day of elections; the changes are implemented on this day and thereafter transitional arrangements provide for a return to the normal electoral cycle.

EU Wildlife Trade Regulation

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce charges for licences issued under the new EU Wildlife Trade Regulation; and if he will make a statement. [4438]

Mr. Meacher: I have decided that it would be appropriate for businesses and individuals importing or exporting specimens of wildlife species covered by the new EU Wildlife Trade Regulation to make a contribution to the costs of the licensing service operated by my Department. To provide for this, I have laid before Parliament Statutory Instrument No. 1421. This Instrument, which will come into effect on 1 July 1997, will require applicants for import or export licences to pay a fee.

In response to concerns expressed by wildlife traders, the scheme has been modified to ensure that businesses and individuals are not adversely affected by the introduction of fees. Applicants will have to pay only a proportion of the actual costs of processing licence applications. The basic fee will be £10.00 per species for animals, and £7.00 per genus for plants and corals, with a discount for larger consignments. Tourists bringing home holiday souvenirs made from controlled species will pay a fee of £5.00.

The new EU Regulation will prohibit the sale and purchase of certain species unless a specific exemption has been granted. I have no plans at present to introduce fees for such exemptions.

My Department will have discretion to waive fees in non-commercial cases which will have benefits for the conservation of the species concerned.

TRANSPORT

Roads (Verge Cutting)

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will include within his Department's estimates for the next financial year the re-introduction of cutting of verges on trunk roads within built-up areas. [2973]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In 1997–98, verge cutting was reduced in cases where safety was not compromised. The Department will be considering carefully detailed expenditure plans for 1998–99 and a decision will be announced in due course.

M6 (Congestion)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to tackle congestion on the M6; and if he will make a statement. [3752]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are two schemes in the Roads Programme to widen sections of the M6 between junctions 11A and 16 and Junctions 16 to 19. However, we are committed to strategic review of the Roads Programme. The terms of reference are not yet settled so you will appreciate that I cannot say what the effects of the review will be for the M6.

Road Contracts

Sir George Young: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 9 June, *Official Report,* column *318,* whether the £350 million worth of contracts planned for 1997–98 will now be proceeded with. [3427]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Capital expenditure of £350 million on essential capital maintenance of roads and bridges planned for 1997–98 and we are proceeding with letting the necessary contracts.

A46 (Dualling)

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he proposes to reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham of 15 May regarding the dualling of the A46; and if he will make a statement on his proposals for the dualling of the A46. [3432]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport wrote to the hon. Member on 12 June 1997. He said that we are committed to a strategic review of the

Road Programme. The terms of reference are not yet settled so you will appreciate that I cannot say what the effects of the review will be for this scheme.

Road Programme (Bypasses)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what implications the public expenditure reviews will have for the current year's bids from local authorities for funds for local bypasses. [4000]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The comprehensive spending review now underway will be considering the disposition of resources within the Department's limits for next year announced in last November's budget.

Railway Stations (Disabled Access)

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about Railtrack's proposals to ensure that there is full access to railway stations for people with disabilities in wheelchairs. [3932]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Rail Regulator requires Railtrack, under the terms of their station operator's licence, to establish a Disabled People's Protection Policy. It is Railtrack's stated policy to meet the latest standards required when carrying out major refurbishment to stations or building new ones.

The Rail Regulator's recent statement on regulatory objectives for passenger train and station operators, which includes Railtrack, urged operators to set targets for significant improvements to accessibility for disabled passengers in the shortest possible timescale.

Access to railway stations is covered by the provisions of Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act. There are specific provisions which deal with the removal of physical barriers to access where that is deemed reasonable.

Radioactive Material (Transport by Plane)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will ensure that British Nuclear Fuels do not transport radioactive material by plane to Sellafield until the Government have reassessed the safety standards for such flights. [4207]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand that BNFL have no current plans to transport radioactive materials to Sellafield by air.

However radioactive material has been safely transported by air from Sellafield for many years, in packages meeting the recommendations of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Safety Standards as promulgated in the International Civil Aviation Organisation's Technical Instructions for the Safe Transport of Dangerous Goods by Air on which UK law is based.

The IAEA keeps its standards under continuous review and recently revised and strengthened its recommended standards for the safe transport of radioactive material by air. We thus see no purpose in a further safety review at this time.

We expect the latest IAEA recommendations to be implemented into UK law when they have been introduced into ICAO's Technical Instructions for the Safe Transport of Dangerous Goods by Air.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Aquaculture

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the LINK programme on Aquaculture has examined the competitiveness of ecologically sound systems of aquaculture; and if he will make a statement. [3578]

Mr. Morley: While no proposal on this particular subject has come forward under Aquaculture LINK, minimising the environmental impact of aquaculture is one of the key themes of the programme. It already includes a project on the environmental aspects of site assessments for salmon farming, and a proposal to study the impact on freshwater lochs of wastes from aquaculture operations is under consideration. We have recently issued a further call for proposals in this area. As with other LINK programmes, projects funded through Aquaculture LINK must have industry support, be of high scientific quality and be endorsed by the Programme Management Committee (an independent body of aquaculture experts) and the programme sponsors.

Special Advisers

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many special advisers were employed at his Department on *(a)* 1 April and *(b)* 1 June and at what cost, indicating separately the cost of secretarial and office support staff. [3431]

Dr. John Cunningham: On 1 April my department employed one special adviser. On 1 June two special advisers were employed.

The rates of pay for a special adviser on 1 April were between £20,631 and £71,517. The pay system for special advisers was revised on 3 May and they are now paid between £24,349 and £73,484 per annum. Their salaries are negotiated individually and are confidential. Details are not provided in order to protect the privacy of the individuals concerned.

On 1 April one personal secretary worked directly to the special adviser. On 1 June one personal secretary worked directly to the two special advisers. Personal secretaries in London are currently paid between £9,937 and £18,079 per annum (including London Weighting and secretarial allowances). Details are not provided in order to protect the privacy of the individuals concerned. No support staff have worked directly to the special advisers.

Fibre Flax Production

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he proposes to prevent European agricultural subsidies being paid for the growing of fibre flax on land of environmental importance. [3344]

Mr. Rooker: The Government consider that fibre flax is a useful, and relatively environment-friendly alternative crop. A number of changes have recently been made to flax regime, which should ensure flax is grown on suitable land, appropriately cultivated and for a definite end use. However, in view of the recent concern, we are looking at a range of options specifically to address the problem of its cultivation on valuable wildlife sites.

BSE

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to review the briefings on BSE and the selective cull which are given by veterinary officers of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [4055]

Mr. Rooker: Veterinary officers do, in the course of their duties, discuss BSE and the selective cull with individual farmers and from time to time at other meetings. I am not aware of any need to review the way in which this is done, but if the hon. Member has something particular in mind, I would be more than happy to discuss any points she wishes to put to me on this.

Horticulture

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the LINK programme on Horticulture has examined the competitiveness of permaculture-based systems; and if he will make a statement. [3579]

Mr. Rooker: The competitiveness of permaculture-based systems has not been examined by the Horticulture LINK. Such matters are more appropriate for funding by industry organisations.

MAFF Regional Panels

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to introduce MAFF regional panels. [3919]

Mr. Rooker: None. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food announced the disbandment of the MAFF regional panels on 28 May 1997, as part of a new approach to create a more direct, open and accessible Ministry for all those who use, live and work in the countryside.

Fish Quotas

Mr. Doran: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what income from the statutory levy on first-hand sale of fish was received by the Seafish Industry Authority in the last full year for which figures are available; what quantities this represented for each species governed by quota regulations; and whether these figures for quantities sold were in line with recorded landings of each of those species. [3652]

Mr. Morley: The amount of levy received by the Sea Fish Industry Authority (SFIA) in the financial year 1996–97 is as follows:

1996–97 levy received by value

	£
Whitefish	5,686,499
Pelagic	401,848
Shellfish	1,258,792
Cockles etc.	65,684
Fishmeal	336,449
Total	7,749,272

Levy is collected on first-hand sales of fish in the UK according to the method of its presentation on the market. Records of the levy collected by SFIA on such sales are not kept in a format that would enable the income to be broken down by species and compared with recorded landings.

Mr. Doran: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on how many occasions inspectors from his Department stopped and checked overland consignments of fish from other ports to the fish market at Grimsby in the last year for which figures are available; and on how many occasions charges were brought for breaches of quota legislation. [3653]

Mr. Morley: Over the last 12 months specific checks have been carried out on 14 consignments of fish brought overland to Grimsby pursuant to Article 13 of Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2847/93 of 12 October 1993 establishing a control system applicable to the common fisheries policy. There have been no prosecutions to date.

Slaughterhouses

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans his Department has to introduce mandatory minimum stunning current levels for each species prior to slaughter in slaughterhouses; and if he will make a statement. [3228]

Mr. Morley: We welcome the fact that the European Commission is preparing a proposal which would introduce minimum stunning currents. We shall be supporting this, subject to the detailed provisions being satisfactory.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 18 June 1997

HOME DEPARTMENT

Hillsborough Disaster

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reopen the inquiry into the Hillsborough disaster; and if he will make a statement. [4160]

Mr. Michael: My right hon. Friend is considering the representations which have been made, calling for a next inquiry into the Hillsborough disaster. He will announce his decision as soon as he can.

Fire Services

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the Government's policy towards the use of the 1979 pay formula to determine firefighters' pay. [4233]

Mr. George Howarth: The pay of firefighters is negotiated between the employers and employees in the National Joint Council for Local Authorities' Fire Brigades. The Government have no proposals for changing the present arrangements.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the pay of firefighters. [3967]

Mr. Howarth: The determination of firefighters' pay is a matter for the National Joint Council for Local Authorities' Fire Brigades.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review Circular 5/92 to take account of the interpretation of his powers under section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947 made by the London Fire and Civil Defence Authority in 1996. [3970]

Mr. Howarth: My right hon. Friend will wish to consider whether generally there is a need to update and amend existing fire service legislation. This will be among the matters to be addressed.

Fire Risks

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the criteria for identifying fire risk areas A to D in London. [3968]

Mr. George Howarth: Guidance on fire risk is given in Fire Service Circular No. 4/1985, which was issued on 22 May 1985. A copy is held in the Library.

Au Pairs

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the criteria determining privileged nationalities for the purpose of admission of au pairs; and what plans he has to review these criteria. [3966]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Past criteria for inclusion in the au pair scheme reflected restriction to unmarried young people mainly from western European countries and the exclusion of countries which proved a significant source of immigration abuse. We have no plans at present to review the scheme.

Prison Service Budget

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the prison service budget for 1996. [3792]

Ms Joyce Quin: The provision available to the Prison Service in 1996–97, as set out in the Main and Supplementary Supply Estimates presented to Parliament, was £1,642,316,000. Details of expenditure against this provision will be contained in the Appropriation Account for Class VII, Vote 2 (Prisons, England and Wales) due to be published towards the end of 1997.

Closed Circuit Television

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what assessment he has made of Colchester's role as a garrison town in evaluating the sums to be provided to the town for CCTV; [3977]

(2) if he will provide Colchester borough council with £100,000 to complete the town's closed circuit television system. [3915]

Mr. Michael: Bids under round three of the closed circuit television challenge competition were assessed against the criteria set out in the published bidding guidance. Colchester was awarded £135,000; no bid received more. No more funds are available from the Home Office for CCTV in the current financial year. A decision on whether funds will be available in 1998–99 will be made later in the summer.

Prisoners

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the percentage of prison inmates who were unemployed immediately prior to their incarceration. [3788]

Ms Joyce Quin: No information is available centrally on prisoners' employment status immediately before reception into prison.

However, the National Prison Survey, conducted in January and February 1991, found that 49 per cent. of prisoners were not in paid work just before they came to prison; this included 33 per cent. who said they were unemployed. No more up to date figures are available.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the prison population in June 1996 and what is the prison population currently; and if he will make a statement. [3791]

Ms Quin: The prison population in England and Wales on 30 June 1996 was 55,256. Provisional information for 13 June 1997 shows the prison population to be 60,871.

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners were accommodated at *(a)* Camphill, *(b)* Albany and *(c)* Parkhurst prisons on the Isle of Wight on 1 April in each of the last five years. [4083]

Ms Quin: The available figures detailed in the attached table show the population recorded on 31 March on each of the last five years in the three Isle of Wight prisons.

Isle of Wight prison population

	31 March 1993	*31 March 1994*	*31 March 1995*	*31 March 1996*	*31 March 1997*
Camp Hill	327	377	411	406	471
Albany	247[9]	378	425	423	430
Parkhurst	205	239	222	266	289

Parkhurst Prison

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the capital expenditure at Parkhurst prison on the Isle of Wight in each of the past five years; and if the capital expenditure was required to maintain the prison's former category or current category. [4080]

Ms Joyce Quin: Capital expenditure at Parkhurst for the past five years was:

Financial year	*£000s*
1992–93	6,387.7
1993–94	2,583.3
1994–95	12,230
1995–96	9,032.1
1996–97	2,627

Of the £32,560, 200 spent on capital projects between 1992 and 1997, £9,600,000 can be directly attributed to security and of this £5,423,000 was specifically spent on maintaining Parkhurst's former category A status.

Prison Categories

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are his plans in respect of the categorisation of *(a)* Camphill, *(b)* Albany and *(c)* Parkhurst prisons. [4082]

Ms Joyce Quin: The Prison Service has no present plans to change the security categories of the three Isle of Wight prisons. These will remain as:

Camp Hill: category C training prison

Albany: category B training prison

Parkhurst: category B training prison

Football (Arrests)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many arrests have been made at *(a)* Premier League and *(b)* Football League grounds in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [4167]

Mr. Michael: The available information is as follows:

Season	*Arrests at Premier League matches*	*Arrests at Football League matches*
1991–92	2,114	2,892
1992–93	1,647	2,941
1993–94	1,630	2,597
1994–95	1,713	2,127
1995–96	1,697	1,740

Season	*Arrests at cup matches*
1991–92	1,372
1992–93	1,739
1993–94	1,296
1994–95	1,265
1995–96	897

Season	*European matches*	*Play offs*	*Other matches*
1993–94	36	80	171
1994–95	97	126	297
1995–96	22	134	320

All the above figures are for arrests both inside and outside the grounds and have been provided by the National Criminal Intelligence Service. Figures for 1996–97 are currently being collected and will be available in due course.

Public Houses

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will extend the right to object to the granting of pub licences to persons in addition to the police. [4078]

Mr. George Howarth: Under the existing licensing law, anyone may object to an application for a liquor licence.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Next Steps Agencies

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list the Next Steps Agencies currently in operation, indicating the number of civil servants employed in each. [3736]

Dr. David Clark: The Next Steps Agencies currently in operation and the number of civil servants employed in each is set out in the table.

Total civil servants working in Agencies and on Next Steps lines (including Northern Ireland Civil Service and Forestry Commission)

Agencies	*Number of civil servants*[1]
Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency	845
Army Base Repair Organisation	2,950
Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency	3,695
Army Individual Training Organisation	4,410
Army Personnel Centre	1,270
Army Technical Support Agency	800
Business Development Service	245
Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments	180
CCTA	175
Central Office of Information	305
Central Science Laboratory	520
Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science	410
Civil Service College	230
COASTGUARD	655
Companies House	800
Compensation Agency	110
Construction Service	625

Total civil servants working in Agencies and on Next Steps lines (including Northern Ireland Civil Service and Forestry Commission)

Agencies	Number of civil servants[1]
Court Service	9,200
Defence Analytical Services Agency	115
Defence Animal Centre	60
Defence Bills Agency	655
Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency	530
Defence Codification Agency	145
Defence Dental Agency	110
Defence Estate Organisation	1,170
Defence Evaluation and Research Agency	12,220
Defence Intelligence and Security Centre	105
Defence Medical Training Organisation	80
Defence Postal and Courier Services Agency	330
Defence Secondary Care Agency	585
Defence Transport and Movements Executive	140
Defence Vetting Agency	55
Disposal Sales Agency	65
Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency	3,500
Driver and Vehicle Licensing (Northern Ireland)	235
Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency	290
Driving Standards Agency	1,940
Duke of York's Royal Military School	100
Employment Service	29,180
Employment Tribunals Service	625
Environment and Heritage Service	310
Farming and Rural Conservation Agency	435
Fire Service College	215
Fisheries Research Services	205
Forensic Science Service	1,185
Forensic Science Service of Northern Ireland	120
Forest Enterprise	2,585
Forestry Commission Research Agency	310
Government Car and Despatch Agency	225
Government Property Lawyers	105
Government Purchasing Agency	65
Health Estates	120
Highways Agency	1,550
Historic Royal Palaces Agency	445
Historic Scotland	585
HM Land Registry	7,865
HM Prison Service	37,705
Industrial Research and Technology Unit	150
Insolvency Service	1,285
Intervention Board	975
Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre	135
Land Registers of Northern Ireland	210
Logistic Information Systems Agency	165
Marine Safety Agency	315
Meat Hygiene Service	795
Medical Devices Agency	120
Medical Supplies Agency	215
Medicines Control Agency	390
Meteorological Office	2,085
Military Survey	705
Ministry of Defence Police	3,730
National Savings	4,290
National Weights and Measures Laboratory	50
Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation	1,535
Naval Bases and Supply Agency	9,170
Naval Manning Agency	85
Naval Recruiting and Training Agency	1,580
NHS Estates	145
NHS Pensions Agency	365
Northern Ireland Child Support Agency	910
Northern Ireland Prison Service	2,995
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency	120
Office for National Statistics	2,895
Ordnance Survey	1,810
Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland	175
Patent Office	710
Pay and Personnel Agency	900
Pesticides Safety Directorate	195
Planning Inspectorate	630
Planning Service	380
Property Advisers to the Civil Estate	200
Public Record Office	430
Public Record Office of Northern Ireland	60
Public Trust Office	550
Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre	50
Queen Victoria School	70
Radiocommunications Agency	510
RAF Logistics Support Services	445
RAF Maintenance Group Defence Agency	4,455
RAF Personnel Management Agency	215
RAF Signals Engineering Establishment	565
RAF Training Group Defence Agency	2,135
Rate Collection Agency	235
Registers of Scotland	1,065
Rivers Agency	460
Roads Service	2,140
Royal Mint	985
Royal Parks Agency	220
Scottish Agricultural Science Agency	125
Scottish Court Service	815
Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency	255
Scottish Office Pensions Agency	155
Scottish Prison Service	4,510
Scottish Record Office	120
Security Facilities Executive	575
Service Children's Education	750
Ships Support Agency	2,300
Social Security Agency (Northern Ireland)	4,630
Social Security Benefits Agency	72,005
Social Security Child Support Agency	7,860
Social Security Contributions Agency	7,380
Social Security Information Technology Services Agency	1,930
Social Security War Pensions Agency	1,195
Student Awards Agency for Scotland	120
The Buying Agency	135
Training and Employment Agency (Northern Ireland)	1,180
Treasury Solicitor's Department	375
UK Hydrographic Office	745
United Kingdom Passport Agency	1,405
Valuation and Lands Agency	280
Valuation Office	4,375
Vehicle Certification Agency	75
Vehicle Inspectorate	1,460
Veterinary Laboratories Agency	985
Veterinary Medicines Directorate	100
Water Service	2,180
Wilton Park	35
Crown Prosecution[2]	5,665
HM Customs and Excise[2]	23,070
Inland Revenue[2]	50,045
Serious Fraud Office[2]	165
Total staff	385,695

[1] April 1997 figures for civil servants including Northern Ireland and Forest Enterprise on the basis of full-time equivalents. Casuals are excluded. Figures are founded to the nearest five.

[2] Departments operating fully on Next Steps lines. Staffing figure for Inland Revenue excludes the Valuation Office.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how many and what percentage of civil servants have been employed by Next Steps Agencies in each of the years since their establishment; and if he will make a statement. [3734]

Dr. Clark: The figures show the number and the percentage of Home Civil Servants working in Next Steps Agencies and on Next Steps lines as at 1 April of each year from 1 April 1988 to 1 April 1997.

Year	*Number of home civil servants working in Agencies and on Next Steps lines as at 1 April*	*Proportion of home civil servants working in Agencies and on Next Steps lines as at 1 April (per cent.)*
1988	0	0
1989	5,844	1
1990	155,660	27
1991	206,870	37
1992	291,969	51
1993	240,036	61
1994	339,621	63
1995	345,342	67
1996	350,408	71
1997	364,563	77

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how many Next Steps Agencies have been in operation in each of the years since their establishment; and if he will make a statement. [3735]

Dr. Clark: The first Next Steps agency was set up in August 1988. The figures listed show the number of Next Steps Agencies which have been in operation since 31 December 1988 and in each year to 31 December 1996.

Year	*Number of Agencies as at 31 December*
1988	3
1989	10
1990	34
1991	[1]57
1992	[2]78
1993	[2]94
1994	[2]104
1995	[2]111
1996	[2]131

[1] Figure includes HM Customs and Excise which is a department operating fully on Next Steps lines.
[2] Figure includes HM Customs and Excise and Inland Revenue which are departments operating fully on Next Steps lines.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what studies his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the efficiency of the Next Steps Agencies; and if he will make a statement. [3732]

Mr. Clark: In the first instance, it is for the Minister responsible for each particular agency to ensure that it is operating efficiently and the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review will help this process. In addition, agencies submit their proposals on efficiency as part of the efficiency planning process and in the 1996 Next Steps Review published in March, there is a great deal of comparative data for agencies including an evaluation of their performance against their efficiency targets. We are committed to providing government which costs less and delivers more which includes Next Steps agencies operating efficiently by emphasising the need for training and enhancing the use of benchmarking and target setting.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what action he proposes to reform the Next Steps Agencies; and if he will make a statement. [3733]

Dr. Clark: The Government will continue to develop Next Steps Agencies by improving performance and efficiency in order to deliver high quality services.

Performance-related Pay

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what assessment he has made of the results of the recent LSE study into performance related pay in the Civil Service; and if he will make a statement. [3660]

Dr. David Clark: The LSE study into performance-related pay looks at only one Department, that of the Inland Revenue. The study was sponsored by the Public Services Tax and Commerce Union and covers perceptions about performance management and performance pay amongst 1,200 of the Inland Revenue's 55,000 staff. The study is not yet complete and has not been released. I am therefore unable to comment on it at this stage. If the study does raise issues of general staff concern, the Inland Revenue, as a good employer, will discuss these with the staff and trade unions involved.

HEALTH

NHS Spending (Managers' Salaries)

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of NHS spending is absorbed by managers' salaries. [3700]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested is given in the table:

	1995–96
Salaries and wages—General and senior managers	£789,507,000
As percentage of total salaries and wages	5.28 per cent.
As percentage of total revenue expenditure	3.30 per cent.

Source:
Financial returns of health authorities and National Health Service trusts.
Notes:
[1] Information is provisional.
[2] Salaries and wages figures are based upon gross costs and include Employers National Insurance and Superannuation costs.
[3] The figures given are for hospital and community health services only. Family health services authorities and other health bodies are excluded as comparable figures are not collect centrally.

Obesity

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for tackling levels of obesity and obesity-related illnesses in the United Kingdom. [3515]

Ms Jowell: Tackling obesity is a particularly challenging problem. "The Health of the Nation" target is to reduce the percentages of men and women aged 16 to 64 who are obese 6 per cent. for men and 8 per cent. for women by 2005. However in 1995 15 per cent. of men and 16.5 per cent. of women were obese, highlighting the gravity of the problem. Obesity is a long-term problem and needs a long-term strategy. We will continue to

support the action on obesity and obesity-related illness initiated by the Nutrition Task Force and the Physical Activity Task Force which addresses:

(a) prevention of increasing fatness in the whole population;

(b) the particular problems of high risk groups e.g. those already overweight;

(c) treatment of those who are already obese.

We also recognise how important a balanced diet is for giving young people a healthy start in life. This is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has recently proposed the introduction of nutrition standards for inclusion in school meals contracts.

Fluoridisation

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received about fluoridisation of water; and if he will make a statement. [4063]

Mr. Milburn: None.

Asthma

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for health what was the incidence of asthma *(a)* in the Colchester parliamentary constituency and *(b)* nationally in each year since 1987. [4178]

Ms Jowell: According to the available data provided by North Essex Health Authority, the number of in-patient finished consultant episodes for asthma, for people whose home address was in Colchester, was as follows:

1994–95: 909

1995–96: 1,023

1996–97: 1,075

1996–97 is a forecast figure as data are only available until end of February 1997. Nationally, there are no comprehensive data on the number of people with asthma.

According to data collected by the Royal College of General Practitioners, the mean weekly incidence of new GP episodes of asthma per 100,000 population in England for each year since 1987 was as follows:

1987: 27.2

1988: 33.3

1989: 34.0

1990: 37.3

1991: 46.3

1992: 48.3

1993: 50.3

1994: 49.2

1995: 40.3

1996: 38.2

Food Additives

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of food additives in use in the United Kingdom are *(a)* proven and *(b)* suspected animal carcinogens, teratogens or both; and if he will make a statement. [2635]

Ms Jowell: Food additives are not included in permitted lists unless there is a technological need for them and they are considered safe-in-use. Currently, a number of regulations made under the United Kingdom's Food Safety Act 1990 control the use of food additives, which are approved through the European Commission's Scientific Committee for Food (SCF). Safety is the paramount consideration and positive evidence of this, including the results of specified toxicological tests, is required before approval is given. Known human carcinogens or teratogens are not permitted for use as food additives.

It is not possible to give a percentage of additives which may have been suspected of being carcinogenic or teratogenic in animals, nor are internationally agreed classification systems available that permit the categorisation of food additives as proven animal carcinogens or teratogens.

Research into food additives is kept under constant review and if any adverse evidence should come to light the SCF would be asked to reconsider their advice.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Jubilee 2000

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has received from Jubilee 2000; and if she will make a statement. [3807]

Clare Short: Jubilee 2000 have been in touch with me on a number of occasions, most recently on 11 June, when I met representatives of the Debt Crisis Network to discuss their latest proposal for reducing the debts of the poorest countries.

I welcome the efforts of the Debt Crisis Network, and other non-governmental organisations, in raising awareness in the UK and elsewhere of the debt problems faced by many developing countries. We share a common objective—the eradication of poverty in developing countries. The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries debt initiative, which aims to reduce the debts of qualifying countries to affordable levels, will play an important part in helping to achieve this. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer and I shall be pressing for early and flexible implementation of this initiative in the appropriate fora, such as this week's G7 Summit in Denver.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time persons employed by her Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3 an hour. [4197]

Clare Short: The table provides the figures requested:

	Numbers earning less than £4.00 per hour	*Numbers earning less than £3.50 per hour*	*Numbers earning less than £3.00 per hour*
Full-time	27	21	Nil
Part-time	3	1	Nil

Kenya

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what development assistance is being provided by the government to Kenya in the current year. [4040]

Clare Short: Development assistance is being provided for a range of activities, in particular those which will improve access by the poor to essential health services and basic education and increase incomes of smallholder farmers and the urban poor. Support for the Government of Kenya's economic reform programme is also being provided to fulfil a commitment made by the previous British Government. Total bilateral aid expenditure is expected to be about £30 million in the 1997–98 financial year.

Women (Rights and Status)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the progress made in respect of the rights and status of women since the 4 UN World Conference on Women in 1995. [3755]

Clare Short: The Beijing Conference was a landmark for gender equality. We are building on the progress previously noted in the development section of the UK's National Report published by DfEE last November, copies of which were placed in the Library of the House. We assess and address inequalities between women and men, girls and boys in relation to all the strategic objectives established in the Beijing Platform for Action. Progress has included more systematic tackling of gender inequalities as part of all our development co-operation activities. We have also increased the number of focused initiatives to enhance women's empowerment and strengthened our dialogue with multilateral organisations. I will outline future plans in my speech at the Commonwealth Institute later this month.

Indonesia

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will place in the Library a copy of the correspondence referred to in paragraph 40 of the National Audit Office report,"Aid to Indonesia", relating to aid proposals and defence sales. [2278]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I have been asked to reply.

The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett) will write to the hon. Member shortly. Copies of the letter will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Sustainable Development

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has for consultation with women about appropriate ways to promote sustainable development; and if he will make a statement; [3747]

(2) what plans he has to ensure opportunities for women to participate in decision-making on environmental matters; and if he will make a statement. [3748]

Ms Angela Eagle: Our sustainable development strategy involves environmental, economic and social goals and is about improving the quality of life for all. Women's groups will be consulted with others as we draw up proposals for revising the strategy over the coming months and we will continue to consult widely—including with appropriate women's organisations—as the Department works up its environmental programmes. As part of our initiative to increase the influence of women in decision-making we are in the process of setting targets for higher levels of representation by women in our public bodies.

OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how the Government will ensure that environmental protection is fully integrated into the OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment; [3962]

(2) what is the Government's policy on *(a)* the formal consultation of non-Governmental organisations by OECD Governments on the OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment and *(b)* an immediate, independent review of the environmental, social and consumer impacts of the OECD Multilateral Agreement on investments; [3958]

(3) if the OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment will have precedence over existing multilateral environmental agreements to which the UK is a signatory on the ozone layer, climate and biodiversity. [3961]

Ms Angela Eagle: The Government would not want to see a Multilateral Agreement on Investment which damaged our commitment to sustainable development and to environment protection. We shall also want to ensure that obligations under multilateral environmental agreements are fully safeguarded. We are aware of the concerns raised by environmental non-governmental organisations and support both formal and informal consultation with them as negotiations continue. We will discuss with negotiating partners in the OECD whether there is a need for an impact study of the Agreement.

Council Tax (Oxfordshire)

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many representations he has received from council tax payers in Oxfordshire concerning the level of the council tax levied by Oxfordshire county council for 1997–98. [3801]

Mr. Raynsford: We have received three letters from local tax payers complaining about the level of council tax set by Oxfordshire County Council for 1997–98.

Fly Tipping

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to monitor the incidence of illegal fly tipping of waste following the introduction of the landfill tax; and if he will make a statement. [3779]

Ms Angela Eagle: Responsibility for monitoring illegal fly tipping, clearance of the wastes involved and pursuing offenders, lies with a number of organisations. The Environment Agency is actively working with these organisations to gather reliable information on fly tipping and other forms of illegal waste disposal.

Most notably a co-operative exercise is planned between the Environment Agency, Local Government and the Tidy Britain Group to survey the incidence of fly tipping twelve months on from the introduction of the landfill tax. A report summarising the finding is due to be published in the first half of 1998.

Further co-operative surveys are planned with the emphasis on improving the quality of data collected by using standard definitions of waste types and quantities.

The evidence of increased fly tipping gathered to date is not conclusive, and may reflect increased public awareness and concern over fly tipping rather than a demonstrable increase in incidents. Nevertheless the Environment Agency are treating this matter very seriously and are working with local authorities to co-ordinate any necessary enforcement action.

City Challenge

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many City Challenge schemes are currently in train; how many *(a)* public and *(b)* private money has been received by each; and if he has received (i) the exit strategies and (ii) the date of the completion of each scheme. [4007]

Ms Angela Eagle: There are 20 City Challenge schemes currently in train.

The latest published figures for the total amount of public and private money received or attracted by each of these schemes are:

Partnership	*Actual public funding to 31 March 1996 (£000)*[1]	*Actual private sector funding to 31 March 1996 (£000)*
Barnsley	57,545	23,611
Batley (Kirklees)	54,651	49,579
Blackburn	48,020	98,984
Bolton	47,653	33,843
Bootle (Sefton)	42,894	101,161
Brixton (Lambeth)	46,006	34,547
Dalston (Hackney)	92,404	52,415
Derby	49,232	18,371
Harlesden (Brent)	37,616	107,579
Hartlepool	40,781	40,431
Leicester	27,956	34,301
Newtown South Aston (Birmingham)	70,152	45,305
North Kensington (Kensington and Chelsea)	66,227	29,705
North Tyneside	77,255	174,171
Stockton on Tees	55,273	47,837
Stratford (Newham)	89,224	73,732
Sunderland	70,032	30,153
Tipton (Sandwell)	52,574	48,546
Walsall	40,337	50,430
Wigan	43,708	57,960

[1] This comprises funding from City Challenge Grant; other DOE programmes; other Government departments; local authority main programmes; and Housing Corporation grant.

The Exit or Forward Strategy is an integral part of each Partnership's annual Action Plan. The Plan is discussed and developed over the lifetime of City Challenge.

The five year period of Government funding for the 20 partnerships ends on 31 March 1998 but, exceptionally, approval has been given for one partnership—North Tyneside—to implement its programme over 6 years. There will be some, limited, grant-funded expenditure taking place in the year after the main funding period ends.

Water Treatment

Mr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress by the water companies in cleaning bathing water on British coastlines, and what further measures he proposes to obtain higher standards of effluent treatment disposal by water companies. [3814]

Ms Angela Eagle: The improvement programme undertaken by the water companies in England and Wales, the water authorities in Scotland and the water service in Northern Ireland has led to 90 per cent. of UK bathing waters meeting the EC Bathing Water Directive's mandatory coliform bacteria standards in the 1996 bathing season. This compares with compliance rates of 67 per cent. and 80 per cent. in 1988 and 1993 respectively. Compliance rates should further increase as more schemes are completed over the next few years under this Directive and under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive.

Climate Change Convention

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposed amendments have been tabled by the Dutch Presidency on behalf of European Union member states to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in preparation for the review conference in Kyoto on the convention. [3818]

Ms Angela Eagle: I have placed a copy of the European Union proposal for a Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, together with a copy of a proposed EU amendment to the Convention itself, in the library of this House.

Transmitter Masts

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will give greater powers to local planning authorities to restrict inappropriate siting of transmitter masts for cellular phone networks more than 10 metres in height. [4018]

Mr. Raynsford: Local planning authorities already have adequate powers to influence the siting of transmission masts for cellular phone networks that are more than 10 metres in height. Under the prior approval procedure of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995, local planning authorities have the opportunity to say whether they wish to approve, within 28 days, details of the siting and appearance of permitted mast development of up to 15 metres high proposed by licensed telecommunications code system operators outside protected areas. The authority is able to refuse approval if it considers there to be a serious threat to amenity. A full planning application must be made to the local planning authority for all masts proposed in protected areas, such as a National Park, area of outstanding natural beauty or conservation area, and for all masts of more than 15 metres in height elsewhere.

Air Quality (London)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the air quality in London in relation to that of other EU capitals; and if he will make a statement. [3664]

Ms Angela Eagle: The Department in co-operation with local authorities, currently monitors air quality at 24 automatic, and over 100 non-automatic stations in Greater London. A variety of pollutants are monitored at these sites including nitrogen dioxide, ozone, sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, fine particles (PM_{10}), hydrocarbons and lead. Levels of these pollutants, in London and other UK cities, together with exceedences of air quality standards and guidelines, are presented in the Department's 18th Edition of the Digest of Environmental Protection and Water Statistics. A copy of the Digest is available in the House of Commons Library. The 19th edition of the Digest, containing information on air quality during 1995 will be published in July.

Information on levels of pollution in major cities elsewhere in the European Union is not held centrally. A European Topic Centre on air quality has been established by the European Environment Agency to improve the availability and comparability of information on air quality at the European level, including urban air quality, and to report on key issues on a regular basis. The Agency is expected to publish a report entitled "Air Pollution in Europe in 1997" during the summer.

Hedgerows

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if information on hedgerow removal notices being held on public registers by local planning authorities will be co-ordinated centrally and published on a regular basis. [4161]

Ms Angela Eagle: My officials are consulting representatives of local government about the collection of information on hedgerow removal notices. Decisions will be taken in the light of the consultation.

Cement Manufacture

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Government plans to issue its response to the House Environment Select Committee's third report of the 1996–97 session, on the environmental impact of cement manufacture. [4830]

Mr. Meacher: The Government's response to the Environment Committee's Report has been issued today and copies have been placed in the Library. The response addresses the Committee's conclusions and recommendations relating to Government policy on pollution control, planning, waste management and health issues. It also comments on the Committee's criticism of the Environment Agency. The Environment Agency has issued its own response, which covers the majority of the Committee's recommendations, since these concern the Agency's enforcement role.

The Government has welcomed the Select Committee's careful consideration of this issue and sees the report as a very valuable contribution to public debate, not only on this important subject, but also on broader issues of environmental protection. The Government's response affirms its commitment to regulation industry to prevent harm to human health and minimise impacts on the environment as a whole. The Committee has made a number of trenchant criticisms of the Environment Agency's regulation of the cement industry. In particular it found inadequacies in the Agency's public consultation procedures, lack of consistency in application of environmental standards and deficiencies in the regulation of Castle Cement's Clitheroe works. The Government is deeply concerned that the Committee should have felt it necessary to make such criticisms. The Environment Agency has accepted the Committee's criticism and responded to it positively, with an extensive plan of action designed to bring about better public consultation, improve research and guidance and contribute to further studies of the health effects of pollutants.

I have made clear in discussions with the Agency that the Government expects it to be a fair and rigorous regulator in all its dealings with industry. It must set appropriate standards which fully protect public health and the environment, and then enforce them firmly. The Agency's management has assured me that it is committed to the changes which are needed to ensure that industrial pollution is controlled in a manner which will command the full confidence of Parliament and the public. I can assure Members of this House that I intend to hold the Agency to that promise.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the current United Kingdom target of 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2010 is dependent on other EU countries meeting their targets; and if he will make a statement. [3209]

Mr. Meacher: The Government has set itself a challenging domestic target to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. from 1990 levels by 2010 and we are currently looking at the policy options which could contribute towards that target.

Backed by our target, we shall press for an agreement at the Kyoto Climate Change Conference which sees challenging targets for all developed countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions beyond 2000. However, we do not propose to take on a higher, legally-binding target under the Climate Change Convention so that other EU Countries can have lower targets.

Channel Tunnel Safety Authority

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the channel tunnel Safety Authority to publish its annual report for the year 1995–96. [4574]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Channel Tunnel Safety Authority has today published its eighth Annual Report, covering the period from 1 April 1995 to 31 March 1996. Copies of the Report have been placed in the Library.

Traffic and Pollution (London)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to reduce traffic *(a)* levels and *(b)* pollution in London; and if he will make a statement; [3666]

(2) what plans he has to encourage the use of public transport in London; and if he will make a statement; [3656]

(3) what plans he has to meet representatives of environmental organisations to discuss the level of traffic congestion and pollution in London and other major United Kingdom cities; and if he will make a statement. [3657]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government announced earlier this month that it was launching a fundamental review of the actions required to deliver an integrated transport policy which meets the environmental and transport needs of all regions of the country, including London. The need to address the problems caused by increasing traffic levels and opportunities to encourage the use of public transport will be central to this work. Ministers have already met representatives of a wide range of bodies with an interest in transport issues, including environmental organisations, and will continue to do so throughout the course of the review.

Driving Licence Holders

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many and what percentage of eligible *(a)* men and *(b)* women hold a current full driving licence, in each 10 year age band; and if he will make a statement. [3661]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The number of male and female full driving licence holders by 10 year age band is as follows:

	Male	*Female*	*Total*
16–20	614,431	470,576	1,085,007
21–30	3,412,350	2,895,369	6,307,719
31–40	4,057,396	3,345,138	7,402,534
41–50	3,725,406	2,905,747	6,631,153
51–60	2,983,777	1,995,056	4,978,833
61–70	2,409,678	1,253,960	3,663,638
71–80	1,097,860	497,021	1,594,881
81–90	242,753	90,914	333,667
91–100	6,538	2,043	8,581
Total	18,550,189 (85.3 per cent. of total adult male population of 21,572,667)	13,455,824 (57.9 per cent. of total adult female population of 23,004,762)	32,006,013 (70.4 per cent. of total adult population of 44,576,429)

Some of the population are ineligible to apply for a driving licence on medical grounds. Figures for the total number of men and women eligible to apply for a driving licence are not available and a percentage comparison between those who hold and those who are eligible to apply for a driving licence could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Nuclear Waste Transport

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what is the Government's policy towards the transport of radioactive nuclear waste by air; [3851]

(2) what legislation governs the transport of radioactive nuclear waste by air over the United Kingdom. [3852]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The transport of all radioactive material by air is governed by The Air Navigation (Dangerous Goods) Regulations 1994 SI No. 3187, as amended by The Air Navigation (Dangerous Goods) (Amendment) Regulations 1996 SI No. 3100. As a Contracting State to the Convention an International Civil Aviation, the UK is obliged, under Annex 18, to ensure compliance with the latest edition of the Technical Instructions for the Safe Transport of Dangerous Goods by Air, published biennially by the International Civil Aviation Organisation.

Car Clocking

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for legislation to make illegal the practice of car clocking; and if he will make a statement. [3855]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Trade Descriptions Act 1968 already makes it an offence to sell a car, in the course of a business, with a false odometer reading. Some prosecutions are also taken under the Theft Act 1968. However, I am concerned that there can be difficulties in gathering the necessary evidence of a car's true mileage, and in tracing previous owners, and the Government is looking at ways of tackling these problems. The Director General of Fair Trading is expected to report shortly on the outcome of his recent consultation exercise on

problems concerning used cars, including clocking. I and Ministerial colleagues will consider his findings and recommendations extremely carefully.

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from trading standards chairmen calling for action against the practice of car clocking. [3836]

Ms Jackson: The Institute of Trading Standards Administration and the Local Authorities Co-ordinating Body for Food and Trading Standards responded in 1995 to the consultation paper on new arrangements for vehicle registration. They supported the proposal that the provision of mileage information to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency when a vehicle changes hands should be made mandatory.

The question of making the provision of mileages a mandatory requirement of the registration system is currently under review.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will visit Wyre Piddle, Worcestershire, to discuss the case for the proposed bypass. [3999]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I hope to visit the West Midlands Region at some point in the future and shall bear in mind the possibility of a visit to Wyre Piddle when planning a programme. I should stress, however, that resources are tight and it appears unlikely that there will be funding available in this year's Local Transport Settlement for any new major scheme starts.

Road Tax

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answers to the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) of 2 June, *Official Report*, columns *55–56*, concerning evasion of road tax, if he will negotiate an agency agreement with those authorities who employ their own staff for parking enforcement to monitor unlicensed vehicles in the same way as traffic wardens do. [4065]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) already operates a scheme with London boroughs where local authority parking attendants report unlicensed vehicles to the Agency. Parking attendants detect such vehicles in the course of their day to day duties. Negotiations with a further six London boroughs are in hand and there are plans to extend the scheme to other local authorities outside London who are implementing their own parking enforcement regimes under the decriminalised parking powers now available across the country.

PRIME MINISTER

Quangos

14. **Mr. Pickthall:** To ask the Prime Minister what are his plans for reducing the number of quangos. [2587]

The Prime Minister: The Government believes that the previous Administration created too many unelected, undemocratic quangos. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has announced a review of quangos with the aim of reducing overall numbers.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Indonesia (Defence Exports)

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will ensure that British companies do not undermine current US restrictions on the supply of specific military, security and police transfers to Indonesia; and if he will make a statement. [3586]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We announced on 22 May, *Official Report*, column *135*, an urgent review of the detailed criteria used in considering licence applications for the export of conventional arms worldwide. Current US policy in this field will be taken into account. All countries will be judged against the new criteria.

Visas

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 2 June, *Official Report*, column 82, on waiting times for visa applications, when he expects the Under Secretary of State to write to the hon. Member for Leicester, East. [4014]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The information the hon. Member requested is as follows. My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will therefore not be writing to the hon. Member.

Post	*Waiting time for a straight forward visit application*	*Waiting time if an interview is required for a visit visa*	*Waiting time for a settlement interview*
Bombay	same day	same day	6 months
Islamabad	same day	14 days	Q1 3 months Q2 wives 18 weeks Q2 husbands 7 months Q3 6 months Q4 11.5 months
New Delhi	same day	same day	Q1 same day Q2 11 weeks Q3 19 weeks Q4 6 months
Calcutta	30 minutes	2 days	7 days
Karachi	same day	3 days	5 months
Dhaka	same day	same day	Q1 3 months Q2 6 months Q3 3 months Q4 8 months
Washington	same day	same day	within 24 hours
New York	same day	4 days	same day

Post	*Waiting time for a straight forward visit application*	*Waiting time if an interview is required for a visit visa*	*Waiting time for a settlement interview*
Dar-es-Salaam	same day	same day	same day
Nairobi	same day	17 days	3 months
Lagos	next day	11 days	4 months

Entry clearance posts in the Indian sub-continent receive a heavy volume of applications to join families in the United Kingdom. People applying for an indefinite stay (known as "settlement") are divided into separate queues for interview. This allows posts to deal more quickly with those who may have a claim to compassionate treatment. The queue groupings are:

Q1: Spouses and children under 18 of British citizens; elderly relatives (maximum waiting time—3 months)

Q2: Spouses and children of non-British citizens (maximum waiting time—3 months)

Q3: Fiance(e)s and other first time applicants (maximum waiting time—6 months)

Q4: Re-applicants (maximum waiting time—9 months)

Military, Police and Security Equipment Exports

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment was made of the human rights record of the country for which the trans-shipment of electro-shock batons was licensed in 1993. [3943]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: A search of departmental records has so far not revealed any details of assessments made prior to the granting of this license. My hon. Friend the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Leeds Central will write to the hon. Member once officials have completed their enquiries. Copies of the letter will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what formal procedures there are to monitor the use of military, police or security equipment supplied subject to assurances that the purchasers would not use such hardware for internal repression. [3944]

Mr. Lloyd: No such formal procedures have previously existed. But we are considering how best to take forward our commitment to prevent British companies from manufacturing, selling or procuring equipment primarily designed for torture and strengthen the monitoring of end-use of defence exports.

Iraq

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action Her Majesty's Government are taking to obtain the balance of compensation owed by Iraq to former British hostages held in Kuwait, following the Iraqi invasion in 1990; and if he will make a statement. [4171]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Payment of outstanding compensation depends on the flow of money into the Compensation Fund under UN Security Council resolution (SCR) 986 (oil for food). The UK co-sponsored the renewal of this resolution on 4 June (SCR 1111) permitting Iraq to export up to US$2 billion of oil for a further six months.

Minister Without Portfolio

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what role the Minister without Portfolio has in the formulation of policy relating to the European Union. [4206]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Minister without Portfolio is a Member of the sub-committee on European issues of the Cabinet Ministerial Committee on Defence and Overseas Policy (E) DOP.

Algerian Elections

Mr. Gunnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports the United Kingdom observers to the Algerian elections have made to his Department concerning the conduct of the elections. [3766]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: As members of the UN-coordinated election observer team, the two observers from the UK participated in the formulation of the United Nations report on the Algerian legislative elections. The overall conclusion of the UN report was positive although a number of concerns were noted, including on the question of special/mobile polling stations and on the number of ballot boxes.

Mr. Gunnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the United Kingdom observers to the Algerian elections were allowed the freedom usually accorded to international observers at domestic elections; and if they were allowed access to the count. [3767]

Mr. Lloyd: The two British observers who participated in the UN–co-ordinated election observer team in Algeria were able to exercise their role within the confines of the extensive and necessary high level of security provided by the Government of Algeria: and they were allowed access to the count.

Disability Discrimination (European Union)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what consultations his Department (i) has already carried out and (ii) plans to carry out with organisations of and representing disabled people in relation to incorporating references to disability discrimination into the treaty on European Union. [3618]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We strongly supported a reference to non-discrimination on the grounds of disability in the revised Treaty text. The Department for Education and Employment, who have the policy lead on this issue, have consulted a number of non-governmental organisations representing disabled people about both the proposed language on non-discrimination and to ensure that the Community's institutions take the needs of the disabled into account when framing single market legislation.

General Affairs Council

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the outcome of the General Affairs Council held on 2 and 3 June. [4573]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The 23 A Points listed in document 8568/97, the text of which will be placed in the House Library, were approved.

The Council noted the resolutions adopted by the European Parliament, listed in Documents 7145/97 and 8018/97. A copy of these documents will also be placed in the House Library as soon as they are available.

The Presidency gave a brief presentation on the themes for the European Council in Amsterdam on 16–17 June, emphasising that the priority would be bringing the Inter-Governmental Conference to a successful conclusion.

Conclusions were adopted on improving trade access for the Least Developed Countries. HMG hopes that other WTO members will respond positively to the Council's call that they make similar commitments.

The Commission reported on the outcome of negotiations with Canada and Russia on a Framework Agreement on Humane Trapping Standards. The Council Conclusions welcomed progress made, noted the Commission's intention to issue proposals for concluding an Agreement and urged the Commission to report on progress in similar negotiations with the USA. A final decision will be taken at the 19–20 June Environment Council.

The Council adopted the Regulation creating a Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia. The Council also adopted the directives for negotiation between the Community and the Council of Europe concerning co-operation between the Monitoring Centre and the Council of Europe. It was decided that the Monitoring Centre will be based in Vienna.

The Council welcomed the results of the 28 May EU/US summit in The Hague, and noted preparations for the EU/Canada summit at Denver on 20 June. The EU/US summit was a success: key agreements were reached including on customs co-operation; there were detailed discussions also on drugs and crime as well as democracy and human rights. The EU/Canada summit will provided an opportunity to assess the implementation of the EU-Canada Joint Declaration and Joint Action Plan.

The Council noted the forthcoming EU/Japan Sixth annual summit in The Hague on 25 June. Political dialogue will focus on the Korean peninsular and Hong Kong. The Commission will raise Japan's deregulation programme.

The Council agreed Conclusions setting out the EU's future policy towards Hong Kong after the transfer of sovereignty on 30 June. The Council welcomed the recent Commission Communication on future relations with Hong Kong and said that future policy should be based on a number of key guidelines, including Hong Kong's continuing high degree of political and economic autonomy under the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration.

The Presidency announced its intention to present a compromise solution to the Mid Term Review of the Agreement with Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs).

The Council welcomed the outcome of the Ministerial Steering Board in Sintra on 30 May 1997 which had sent a clear message to the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina that further obstruction to peace implementation would not be tolerated. The Council paid tribute to Carl Bildt for his efforts in consolidating peace in Bosnia and promoting lasting stability in the region. It offered its full support to Carlos Westerndorp as his appointed successor.

The Council welcomed the decision by the Albanian authorities to hold elections on 29 June and emphasised that responsibility for the future of the country lay with the Albanian people. The Council adopted a Common Position which provides that the EU will help Albania, within the coordinating framework of the OSCE, to promote the democratic process, a return to political stability and internal security and the holding of free and fair elections. The EU will continue to support economic reforms and to provide humanitarian aid as needed in accordance with the conditions developed in its regional approach.

Having reviewed the recent EU mission to Kinshasa, the Council reiterated the EU's support for democratisation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and for the holding of elections, due in two years' time. The Head of the EU's electoral unit will visit DRC shortly. The Council urged the DRC to give full and unhindered access to refugees by the UN and humanitarian agencies. A Ministerial troika will visit DRC at an appropriate time to discuss democratisation, humanitarian assistance and the future relationship.

The Council discussed relations with Iran and concluded that the conditions were not yet suitable for the return of the EU Ambassadors to Tehran.

The UK supported the Presidency's proposal for an EU declaration responding to the recent announcement by ASEAN to admit Cambodia, Burma and Laos as full ASEAN members in July. The declaration reaffirms the EU's commitment to the EU-ASEAN dialogue process but reiterates Member States' concern about the situation in Burma.

The Council recalled the close ties between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean. It welcomed the proposal to organise a Summit of Heads of State. A recommendation on possible dates, participation and follow up was requested.

The Council adopted a Common Position on conflict prevention and resolution in Africa. In many parts of Africa, progress towards sustainable development had been undermined by conflicts. African countries must take the lead in conflict prevention and resolution in Africa. The EU in turn had a responsibility to support African efforts. An effective policy necessitated a coherent mix of political, economic, development, social and environment instruments.

The Council welcomed the proposal that an EU/Africa Summit should take place not later than the year 2000.

The Council recognised the lack of progress towards respect for human rights and the restoration of accountable, democratic government in Nigeria, and secured agreement to roll over the EU Common Position intact for a further six months. The Council also agreed a more consistent approach to the implementation of the EU visa restrictions.

A Ministerial session of the Intergovernmental Conference took place on 2 and 3 June. It was preceded by an exchange of views with the President and representatives of the European Parliament. Discussion then progressed on the basis of the revised Presidency texts of 31 May (copies of which have been placed in the library of the House.) Subjects covered included Justice and Home Affairs; Flexibility; Common Foreign and Security Policy; Defence; Institutions; Employment.

Schengen Agreement

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the technical and operational documents relating to implementation of the Schengen Agreement; and if he will make a statement. [4230]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have been asked to reply.

We have examined a number of documents relating to implementation of the Schengen Agreement, in connection with the proposal of the Inter-Governmental Conference to incorporate the Agreement into the structures of the European Union. The Government have no intention of signing the Schengen Agreement because it would require the removal of United Kingdom frontier controls with other member states.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Sport (Tobacco Sponsorship)

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage (1) what discussions his Department has had with other Departments on the proposed ban on tobacco companies' sponsorship of sport; [4131]

(2) what consultations he has had with sports organisations and participants who may be adversely affected by a ban on tobacco sponsorship. [4134]

Mr. Banks: We are looking very carefully at how best to achieve an end to the advertising and promotion of tobacco at sports events in a way which will minimise any damage to the sports concerned. Discussions are underway within Government on how best to achieve this and I will be consulting the sports concerned shortly. The Government will publish a White Paper later this year setting out their plans for this and other measures to tackle tobacco consumption. Any legislation will include a transitional period.

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what assessment he has made of *(a)* the number of people employed in sports which receive sponsorship from tobacco companies and *(b)* the likely consequences on employment of a ban on sponsorship by tobacco companies. [4132]

Mr. Banks: I have made no assessment of the number of people employed in sports which receive sponsorship from tobacco companies. We intend to minimise any damage to sports. Discussions are underway within Government on how best to achieve this, and we will be consulting the sports concerned shortly. The Government will publish a White Paper later this year. Any legislation will include a transitional period.

Darts

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what action he intends taking to make darts a sport recognised by his Department. [1554]

Mr. Banks: I would like to see greater recognition of the enjoyment and recreation the game of darts brings to its millions of followers. Grants to individual sports come mainly from the English and United Kingdom Sports Councils, and they decide which activities and organisations should be eligible. The Sports Councils keep priorities under review.

I urge them to recognise the hugely popular sport of darts and I hope to discuss this matter with them.

Sporting Facilities

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans the Government have for improving the range and accessibility of sporting facilities throughout the country for young people. [3159]

Mr. Banks: The Government will take the lead in extending opportunities for participation in sport through a national strategy for sport which will embrace all sections of the community regardless of where they live, social background, age or ability. This strategy will embrace facility provision and the accessibility of sports facilities.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what proposals he has to increase inner-city school children's access to sporting facilities; and if he will make a statement. [2708]

Mr. Banks: The Government will take the lead in extending opportunities for participation in sport through a national strategy for sport which will embrace all sections of the community regardless of where they live, social background, age or ability. We will aim to build on the range of existing initiatives aimed at providing access to sporting facilities for inner city school children, including the Lottery Sports Fund which provides support to deprived areas through the Priority Areas Initiative and the School Community Sports Initiative.

Tourism

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to encourage year-round tourism in national parks. [4016]

Mr. Tom Clarke: My Department encourages efforts to promote year-round tourism so as to maximise the economic benefits to, and spread the pressure of visitor numbers on environmentally sensitive areas. The National Park Authorities have a statutory duty to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of their areas by the public. They are

encouraged to develop policies for visitor management, in co-operation with local authorities, Tourist Boards and others with tourism or recreational responsibilities in their areas. In doing so they take into account the need to conserve the special qualities of the Parks and the principles for sustainable tourism.

National Lottery

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how many Lottery grants have been awarded to organisations and groups in Cleethorpes constituency; and what are the values of those grants.[3165]

Mr. Banks: As at 10 June 8 grants totalling £654,635 had been made to organisations and groups in Cleethorpes. The details are as follows:

Distributing Body	*Award date*	*Recipient*	*Award amount* £
Arts Council of England	15 November 1995	Cleethorpes Borough Council	286,199
National Lottery Charities Board	17 December 1996	Cleethorpes Help the Aged	92,535
National Lottery Charities Board	11 August 1996	Senior Citizens Club	47,976
National Lottery Charities Board	19 December 1995	Grimsby and Cleethorpes Pathfinder Project	44,043
National Lottery Charities Board	11 August 1996	Grimsby and Cleethorpes Home-Start	7,175
National Lottery Charities Board	11 August 1996	4th Cleethorpes (St. Peters) Scout Group	725
Sports Council	02 August 1995	Cleethorpes Borough Council	169,920
Sports Council	05 February 1997	Humber Mouth Yacht Club (Sailing School)	6,062
Total			654,635

Sports Council

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will list the members of the United Kingdom Sports Council, the countries and sports they represent, their period of tenure of office and any moneys paid to them as members. [2754]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 9 June 1997]:* The UKSC's Royal Charter provides for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for National Heritage, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to nominate one member each from their respective Home Country Sports Councils as a member of the UKSC. Other members of the UKSC are appointed in a personal capacity, solely on the basis of merit and their suitability for the post, and not to represent particular countries or sports. While the Royal Charter provides for the remuneration of the Chairman and members of the Council, if the Secretary of State so directs, no members of the UKSC currently receive remuneration for their services.

The current members of the United Kingdom Sports Council are:

Sir Rodney Walker—appointed as a member on 19 September 1996 for 3 years and Acting Chairman since 14 May 1997.

(Chairman of the English Sports Council, Chairman of the Rugby Football League).

Mr. Don Allen—appointed 19 September 1996 for 3 years.

(Chairman of the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, former Irish League footballer).

Mr. Graeme Simmers, OBE, CA—appointed 19 September 1996 for 3 years.

(Chairman of the Scottish Sports Council, former Chairman of the Championships Committee of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews).

Mr. Ossie Wheatley, CBE—appointed 19 September 1996 for 3 years.

(Chairman of the Sports Council for Wales, former Chairman of Glamorgan County Cricket Club).

Mr. Craig Reedie—appointed 19 September 1996 for 3 years.

(Chairman of the British Olympic Association, former Chairman and President of the International Badminton Federation).

Professor Sarah Springman—appointed 19 September 1996 for 3 years.

(Vice-President of the International Triathlon Union).

Dr. Mary Nevill—appointed 1 October 1996 for 3 years.

(former British hockey player, Olympic medallist and international coach).

Mr. Adrian Moorhouse, MBE—appointed 06 February 1997 for 3 years.

(former British swimmer and Olympic medallist).

Ms Judy Simpson—appointed 06 February 1997 for 3 years.

(former British heptathlete, Commonwealth medallist, and President of the Women's Sports Foundation).

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

National Marriage Week

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans the Lord Chancellor's Department has to support National Marriage Week 1998. [3161]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor's Department has made a grant of £75,000 to Marriage Resource to organise National Marriage Week 1998. This is one of 13 projects in a pilot programme running for the financial year 1997–98, at a total cost to the Department of £521,032.

Files (Royal Household)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he has received on the arrangements for the release as public documents of files relating to the royal household, which are between 30 and 100 years old; and if he will make a statement. [3418]

Mr. Hoon: I have not received any representations on this subject.

Official Documents

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the date and title of the oldest document in the possession of the Government which has not been released in whole or in part as a public document. [3416]

Mr. Hoon: Three items containing information from 1873 are the oldest public records still closed to public inspection. They are Office of Land Revenue Records and Enrolments: Enrolments by Books: Office of Woods, Forests, Land Revenues, Works and Buildings and Successors: Purchases, 1873–1910; Office of Land Revenue Records and Enrolments: Enrolments by Books, Board of Trade and Successors, 1873–1928; and Office of Land Revenue Records and Enrolments: Enrolments by Deposit, Office of Woods, Forests, Land Revenues and Successors: Schedule of Rents and Arrears Discharged, 1873–1902. These records are closed for 100 years on grounds of continuing commercial sensitivity, the closure period being calculated from the last date of each item.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will estimate how many files containing documentation wholly or mainly dating from before 1900 have not been released as public documents *(a)* in part and *(b)* as a whole. [3415]

Mr. Hoon: Twenty-seven volumes of boxes of Enrolled Deposited Leases, and associated documents, of the Office of Land Revenue Records and Enrolments, which date partly or wholly from before 1900, are closed in the Public Record Office for 100 years, on grounds of continuing commercial sensitivity.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the titles of the files containing documentation wholly or mainly dating from before 1900 where part or all of the contents have not been released as public documents. [3414]

Mr. Hoon: There are records in five classes of Enrolled and Deposited Leases, and associated documents, of the Office of Land Revenue records of enrolments, which fall into this category. The classes are Enrolments by Books, Office of Woods, Forests, Land Revenues, Works and Buildings and Successors (LRRO 13); Enrolments by Books, Office of Works and Successors (LRRO 14); Enrolments by Books, Board of Trade and Successors (LRRO 15); Enrolments by Deposit: Office of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues and Successors (LRRO 16); and Enrolments by Deposit, Board of Trade (LRRO 17). The items in these classes are described simply by the range of years that they cover, apart from the Schedule of Rents and Arrears discharged, referred to in my earlier Answer.

SCOTLAND

Kintore Bypass

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland for what reason topsoil was buried by contractors constructing the bypass at Kintore in Aberdeenshire. [3513]

Mr. Chisholm: Top soil was retained as part of the foundation of some sections of the road for geotechnical reasons. In all other sections top soil has been stripped and stockpiled for later landscape use, in accordance with normal practice.

Creagan Bridge

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the timetable for the construction of the Creagan bridge, what are the financial resources involved; and if he will make a statement. [3794]

Mr. Chisholm: Preparation of this scheme is well underway to permit a construction start in February 1998, subject to finance being available. Construction is estimated to take 18 months and the estimated scheme costs are £6.3 million, including VAT.

European Union Funding

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to discuss with interested bodies the future of objective 1 funding for the Highlands and Islands; and if he will make a statement. [3795]

Mr. Chisholm: The Government have not put forward detailed submissions at this early stage of the reform of the structural funds. We expect to put forward proposals after the results of the inter-governmental conference are known. In the meantime Scottish Office officials are in discussion with those from the local authorities and Highlands and Islands Enterprise about the future options.

Hopetoun House, Linlithgow

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the public funding made available to Hopetoun house, Linlithgow, over the last five years; what use was made of those funds; how they were invested; and what interest has accrued on them. [3655]

Mr. Chisholm: Awards under the Historic Buildings Repair Grant scheme to Hopetoun House Preservation Trust over the past 5 years have amounted to £272,400. In addition, Lothian and Edinburgh Enterprise have provided £72,600 towards refurbishments. These sums, paid from programmes for which I am responsible, have contributed towards work which has been satisfactorily completed.

I am also aware that sums of £190,465 and £4,000,000 have been awarded by the European Regional Development Fund and the National Heritage Memorial Fund respectively.

School Leavers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what percentage of *(a)* female and *(b)* male children leave school at 16 in Scotland, broken down into local authority areas; and if he will make a statement. [3658]

Mr. Wilson: Percentages for 1995–96, the latest year for which information is available are as follows. Pupils are regarded as having left on achieving the school leaving age in 1995–96 if they:

reached age 16 between 1 March and 30 September 1996 and left school on 31 May 1996;

reached age 16 between 1 October 1995 and the end of February 1996 and left school at the end of the winter term in 1995–96.

These arrangements therefore allow some pupils to leave school while they are still 15 years old.

Local Taxation

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to introduce proposals to allow Wales and Scotland to introduce different systems of local taxation from that being operated in England; and if he will make a statement. [2933]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* The Government's proposals for devolutions to Scotland and Wales will be announced in White Papers in due course.

Housing (Energy Efficiency)

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the average energy efficiency rating for Scotland's housing stock; and if he will provide a breakdown by *(a)* local authority, *(b)* private sector and *(c)* housing association dwellings. [3305]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* This information is not yet available but the report of the 1996 Scottish House Condition Survey, which is expected to be published by Scottish Homes in the autumn, will include information on the energy efficiency rating of the housing stock surveyed.

Rough Sleepers Initiative

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to alter the framework for the distribution of funds under the rough sleepers' initiative. [3306]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* No decisions about the distribution of funds under the rough sleepers initiative will be taken until local authorities have submitted bids and I have received a report from the advisory group which has been established to advise on the merits of the bids received. The deadline for submission of bids is end-July. We have, of course, increased the amount available under the initiative this financial year by £1 million to £4 million.

Percentage of leavers who left at school leaving age 1995–96

	Male	*Female*
Scotland	33.0	24.9
Local authority		
Aberdeen City	37.3	30.0
Aberdeenshire	28.0	20.6
Angus	35.0	25.2
Argyll and Bute	28.7	20.1
Clackmannanshire	24.7	24.4
Dumfries and Galloway	41.6	30.7
Dundee City	37.3	30.5
East Ayrshire	37.3	25.5
East Dunbartonshire	32.8	23.1
East Lothian	32.6	27.6
East Renfrewshire	18.7	19.6
Edinburgh, City of	24.4	20.9
Falkirk	37.0	26.4
Fife	29.6	20.4
Glasgow, City of	39.1	33.3
Highland	28.7	21.4
Inverclyde	27.9	27.5
Midlothian	30.6	26.2
Moray	34.7	23.3
North Ayrshire	31.7	23.3
North Lanarkshire	38.8	26.0
Orkney Islands	38.8	21.9
Perth and Kinross	22.5	16.6
Renfrewshire	36.7	29.1
Scottish Borders	36.7	29.7
Shetland Islands	42.4	21.4
South Ayrshire	32.0	20.7
South Lanarkshire	32.0	22.1
Stirling	25.4	21.7
West Dunbartonshire	41.3	23.9
West Lothian	35.7	28.2
Western Isles	23.2	6.6

Sources:
GRO(S) Mid-Year Population Estimates.
SOEID Annual Survey of School Leavers.

Primary School Class Sizes

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what are *(a)* the average and *(b)* the maximum numbers of children in primary school classes in (i) Inverclyde and (ii) Scotland; how many children are taught in classes with a number in excess of 30 pupils; and if he will make a statement. [3460]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* The latest information for 1995 is as follows:

	Inverclyde	*Scotland*
Average class size	25.1	25.3
Maximum number in class	34	35
Number of pupils in classes of 31 or more	867	76,913

The information excludes the small number of classes which consist of a large group of pupils being taught by more than one teacher. It covers single and two stage classes in publicly funded schools only.

Class sizes are a matter in the first instance for local authorities and the Scottish Joint Negotiating Committee for teachers in school education The Government have made clear the priority it attaches to raising standards in Scottish schools. I expect to work closely with local authorities to help achieve that objective. Last month I made available £13 million for early intervention and raising standards in primary schools.

I will arrange for comparable information for each education authority in Scotland to be placed in the Library of the House.

Food Poisoning

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received from institutions conducting research on E. coli relating to lack of funding. [3614]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* We have received no such representations.

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much his Department has budgeted for research into food-poisoning in 1997–98, broken down to show the funds dedicated to *(a)* E. coli, *(b)* campylobacter and *(c)* salmonella. [3616]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* The information requested is set out in the following tables. The majority of research in this area is funded by the Departments of my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Health and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

E. coli £	*Campylobacter* £	*Salmonella* £
The Scottish Office Department of health		
80,468	—	—
The Scottish Office, Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department		
634,221	106,657	395,511

The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department

The Aberdeen Protein Analysis facility has been awarded £495,000 (£418,000 in 1997–98) for new medical research that will include work on E. coli 0157.

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the research grant applications which have been submitted to the Scottish Office for funding into the causes of E.coli, indicating which of these have been *(a)* accepted and *(b)* rejected within the last six months; what was the date when each was accepted or rejected; and if he will make a statement on the financial costs relating to each application. [3608]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* Eleven applications have been submitted to the Scottish Office since December 1996 of which eight were successful and one was unsuccessful. A further two applications are still under consideration. The applications are listed in the following table.

The Scottish Office Department of Health

(£000s)

Time of application	*Decision*	*Date of decision*	*Amount*
Epidemiology and Laboratory Studies of Escherichia Coli 0157	Accepted	18 April 1997	30
Fine Structure Analysis of VTEC in Scotland[1]	—	18 April 1997	126

[1] This project was neither accepted nor rejected, but deemed to be more appropriate to Research Council funding.

The Scottish Office, Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department

Title of application	*Decision*	*Date of decision*	*Amount*
Prevalence of E. coli 0157: H7 in Scottish Livestock (Part I)	Accepted	14 March 1997	9
Prevalence of E. coli 0157: H7 in Scottish Livestock (Part II)	Accepted	Not yet commissioned	382
Molecular typing of the WL subclone of E. coli 0157: H7	Accepted	2 April 1997	21
Molecular typing of the WL subclone of E. coli 0157: H7	Accepted	2 April 1997	21

The Scottish Office, Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department

Title of application	*Decision*	*Date of decision*	*Amount*
Characterisation of commensal and pathogenic E. coli populations in cattle	Accepted	30 April 1997	180
Improved techniques for the rapid detection of Escherichia coli 0157 in foods	Accepted	30 April 1997	300
Intestinal microbial community structure in VTEC and non-VTEC carrying cattle	Accepted	Not yet commissioned	45
Proposal to investigate the virulence of Escherichia coli 0157	Rejected	17 March 1997	125
Laboratory studies with verocytotoxigenic E. coli, particularly serogroup 0157	Under consideration	—	approximately 85
Consumer perception of risk in relation to food safety	Under consideration	—	approximately 200

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much his Department has spent on research into food-poisoning in each of the last five years, broken down to show the funds dedicated to *(a)* E. coli, *(b)* campylobacter and *(c)* salmonella. [3615]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* The information is set out in the following tables. The majority of research in this area is funded by the Departments of my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Health and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

(£000's)

	E. coli	*Campylobacter*	*Salmonella*
The Scottish Office Department of Health			
1992–93	39	4	—
1993–94	25	—	—
1994–95	5	21	—
1995–96	58	33	—
1996–97	14	11	—
The Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department			
1992–93	48	—	—
1993–94	48	—	—
1994–95	50	—	32
1995–96	70	—	251
1996–97	183	102	420

House Condition Survey

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to undertake a new Scottish House Conditions Survey. [3309]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* The second Scottish House Condition Survey was carried out in 1996 and the results are expected to be published by Scottish Homes in the autumn.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Sub-post Offices

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will lay down minimum standards for proximity of local communities to sub-post offices. [3380]

Mr. Ian McCartney: No. I have instituted a review of options for implementing our election manifesto pledge to grant the Post Office greater commercial freedom, and against this background the Post Office have agreed to suspend their Crown office conversion programme. However, whilst the Government are committed to a nationwide network of post offices, the location of individual post offices must remain an operational matter for the Post Office.

Fireworks

Mr. Burden: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she intends to publish the revised draft firework safety regulations. [4831]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: I propose to publish my proposals for new firework safety regulations tomorrow. Copies of the consultation document will be sent to a wide range of organisations with an interest in firework safety, including consumer groups, enforcement authorities, industry, firework user groups and other groups who use fireworks during religious and cultural festivals. Copies of both the consultation document and the draft regulations are being placed in the Library of the House.

Energy Council

Mr. Miller: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the outcome of the Energy Council meeting held on 27 May. [4832]

Mr. Battle: The Council considered several issues and received reports on matters of interest. I represented the UK.

The Council discussed gas market liberalisation and the renewable energy green paper. First, the gas liberalisation directive: progress was made which I believe puts us on course to achieve a liberalising measure. Discussion centred on three key issues; a framework for market opening, take or pay contracts and emergent markets and regions. I emphasised the Government's commitment to the single market and called for a positive commitment to gas liberalisation through an effective third party access regime as well as market opening so that customers can get the benefits of competition.

On the basis of the views expressed the presidency concluded that on market opening a qualitative approach with quantitative criteria could form the basis for a compromise. This should include power generators and large industrial customers as eligible customers; a minimum percentage opening of gas markets; the possibility of Member States limiting market opening above a certain level; and a progressive market opening. On take or pay contracts discussion focused on the possibility of derogating from the directive if problems arose with future contracts. The presidency concluded that there was support for a system characterised by transparency, well formulated criteria and the involvement of national independent gas authorities and the Commission in any such decisions. On emergent markets the presidency concluded that there was broad support for the proposal to allow Member States only now developing a gas market and those not directly connected to another EU system and having a single external supplier, to derogate from parts of the directive. On emergent regions there was support for further consideration of an approach whereby regions eligible for derogations were listed in an annex.

The presidency's proposals were recognised as a step in the right direction and a good basis for progress in further discussions at a possible second Council on 24 June.

Council also reached agreement on a resolution on the Commission's Green Paper on a renewable strategy. There was some discussion of the Commission's proposal for a Council decision concerning a multiannual programme for the promotion of renewable energy sources in the Community–ALTERNER II. I emphasised that the UK was very positive about renewable and keen to achieve increased targets for renewable energy electricity generation.

There was an exchange of views on the Commission communication on an overall view of energy policy. I welcomed the communication as a first step in the review of Community programmes with an energy component and supported the concept of a framework programme to provide greater transparency for the citizens of Europe and value for money. In order to dovetail with this framework, I suggested ALTERNER II should be limited to a tighter two year programme. The Commission is expected to present a further communication before the end of 1997.

Council conclusions were agreed on climate change and energy policy. They recognised the contribution of actions towards climate change commitments particularly in the development of a renewables strategy, energy efficiency standards, long-term agreements with industry and an electricity industry initiative to address environmental concerns. The conclusions call for further analysis, the preparation of a post-Kyoto action programme and a strategy for the promotion of combined heat and power.

The Commission will submit a revised proposal on energy objectives which will take into account the European Parliament's comments.

The Council noted Commission progress reports on the external dimension of energy networks, the Energy Charter Treaty, the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and information on agreements with industry on energy savings and on co-generation.

The first structured dialogue on energy with the countries of central and eastern Europe (CEECs) focused on energy efficiency and Trans European energy Networks (TENs). CEEC ministers outlined the measures they were taking to increase energy efficiency, develop renewable and meet EU standards. The progress being made with the help of EU programmes, particularly in the areas of TENs, was welcomed and it was agreed that co-operation should continue.

Encryption Services

Mr. Otttaway: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to make an announcement on the proposals put forward in the consultation document "Licensing of Trusted Third Parties for the Provision of Encryption Services." [3975]

Mr. Battle: An analysis of the responses to the Consultation Paper is currently underway. As soon as this process has been completed, and following discussion with ministerial colleagues, a statement will be made.

ACAS Report

Mr. O'Neill: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to receive the annual report for the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service. [4829]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The ACAS Report for 1996 has been laid before both Houses of Parliament. Copies are available from the Vote Office.

Travel Industry

Mr. Cotter: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to introduce legislation which prohibits discrimination by the travel industry against single people. [3948]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The practice in the travel industry of charging single people supplements is based on commercial considerations and I have made the travel industry aware of this matter.

Caviar and Shark Meat Imports

Mr. Flynn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what quantity of *(a)* caviar and *(b)* shark meat is currently imported into the United Kingdom per annum; and if she will make a statement. [2700]

Mrs. Roche: In 1996 the UK imported 31 metric tonnes of caviar (sturgeon roe) worth £5.6 million. Information on shark meat is not available.

The convention on International trade in Endangered Species (CITES) will be holding its biennial meeting between the 9–20 June, in Zimbabwe. During the Conference proposals on the listing of sturgeon and monitoring of shark species will be discussed. The UK will consider all conference proposals carefully and in consideration with our colleagues from the other EU Member States.

Computer Systems

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to prohibit the sale of non-millennium compliant computer systems; and if she will make a statement. [2537]

Mr. Battle: The century date change is a particularly serious issue, but I do not believe that prohibiting the sale of non-millennium compliant computer systems is necessary.

It is for a well informed, individual purchaser to decide for himself what he needs in his own particular case. As for any other hardware or software supply issue, the details of conformance and performance are best covered in a discussion or specification and agreed by commercial negotiation. The law already provides a remedy for the purchaser of defective goods under The Sale of Goods Act 1979 and for services under the Supply of Goods and Services Act 1982, and I see no need for fresh legislation.

Radioactive Discharges

Mr. Flynn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the components of the liquid and gaseous radioactive and chemical discharges which have been released from *(a)* Sellafield and *(b)* Dounreay, stating the activity and mass of each chemical, since these plants became operational. [1845]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 2 June 1997]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the BNFL publication "The Annual Report on Radioactive Discharges and Monitoring of the Environment" and in the case of Dounreay, the figures for liquid and gaseous discharges are contained in the HMSO publication, "Radioactive Waste Discharges form UKAEA Establishments and Associated Monitoring Results", both of which are available from the Library of the House. The amount and content of material discharged from Sellafield and Dounreay are subject to limits set by the Government's regulatory bodies.

Indonesia (Exports)

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the practice of granting export licences for the export of military, security and police equipment or services to Indonesia; if she intends to continue with the practice; and if she will make a statement. [3384]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I have been asked to reply.

We announced on 22 May, *Official Report*, column *135*, an urgent review of the detailed criteria used in considering licence applications for the export of conventional arms worldwide. All countries will be judged against the new criteria.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Class Sizes (Colchester)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the total additional expenditure needed to reduce class sizes to 30 or under for *(a)* all five, six and seven-year-olds and *(b)* all eight, nine and 10-year-olds in the Colchester parliamentary constituency. [4177]

Mr. Byers: Our pledge is to phase out classes of over 30 for all five, six and seven year olds during the lifetime of this Parliament. We will be discussing with local education authorities and others the implementation of our policy following the publication of a White Paper this summer.

Class Sizes (Bolton)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what are the *(a)* average and *(b)* maximum numbers of children in primary school classes in (i) Bolton West, (ii) Bolton North-east and (iii) Bolton South-east; and how many are educated in class sizes of over 30 pupils. [3081]

Mr. Byers: The available information is shown in the following table.

The information in table 2 puts into context the information on maximum class sizes in table 1.

Table 1: Average and maximum class size and number of pupils in classes of 31 or more pupils for classes taught by one teacher in maintained primary schools in the Bolton Parliamentary Constituencies in January 1996

	Average class size	Maximum class size	Pupils in classes of 31 or more
Bolton West	27.9	41	3,137
Bolton North-east	28.8	60	4,033
Bolton South-east	28.7	60	4,549

Table 2: Numbers of classes and pupils by class size for classes taught by one teacher in maintained primary schools in the Bolton Parliamentary constituencies in January 1996

	Size of class											
	1–20		21–30		31–35		36–40		41 or more		Total	
	Number of classes	Number of pupils	Number of classes	Number of pupils	Number of classes	Number of pupils	Number of classes	Number of pupils	Number of classes	Number of pupils	Number of classes	Number of pupils
Bolton West	27	412	115	2,996	75	2,465	16	590	2	82	235	6,545
Bolton North-east	22	361	150	3,917	95	3,134	17	641	5	259	289	8,311
Bolton South-east	31	506	141	3,680	100	3,326	28	1,029	4	194	304	8,735

School Exclusions

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary-aged children have been permanently excluded from school in each local education authority area in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement; [4169]

(2) how many children in special schools have been permanently excluded from school in each local education authority area in each of the last five years. [4170]

Ms Estelle Morris: The numbers of primary, secondary and special school pupils permanently excluded from school in the 1994–95 school year in each local education authority area are set out in the following table. Details of exclusions in 1995–96 are currently being collated and will be available later in the year. Information on exclusions in previous years is not available centrally for each local education authority area.

Permanent exclusions from maintained primary, secondary and special schools and non-maintained special schools in the 1994–95 school year

LEA area	Number of permanent exclusions		
	Primary	Secondary	Special
City of London	0	—	—
Camden	7	41	6
Greenwich	9	45	3
Hackney	8	9	6
Hammersmith and Fulham	9	63	1
Islington	7	58	2
Kensington and Chelsea	4	27	0
Lambeth	12	39	4
Lewisham	15	46	7
Southwark	12	82	2
Tower Hamlets	8	46	5
Wandsworth	9	69	12
Westminster	6	53	0
Barking and Dagenham	9	47	1
Barnet	15	92	1

Permanent exclusions from maintained primary, secondary and special schools and non-maintained special schools in the 1994–95 school year

LEA area	Number of permanent exclusions		
	Primary	Secondary	Special
Bexley	6	47	2
Brent	9	93	2
Bromley	9	86	6
Croydon	11	118	5
Ealing	3	70	0
Enfield	9	75	1
Haringey	2	17	0
Harrow	6	47	2
Havering	2	58	0
Hillingdon	11	47	7
Hounslow	7	80	0
Kingston-upon-Thames	2	24	0
Merton	1	31	3
Newham	11	43	0
Redbridge	2	47	3
Richmond upon Thames	3	31	0
Sutton	4	31	2
Waltham Forest	8	81	2
Birmingham	65	199	2
Coventry	6	95	3
Dudley	9	42	4
Sandwell	9	109	2
Solihull	11	24	6
Walsall	7	49	2
Wolverhampton	10	57	3
Knowsley	2	26	1
Liverpool	14	114	14
St. Helens	2	27	1
Sefton	6	41	0
Wirral	10	39	3
Bolton	7	86	2
Bury	7	56	0
Manchester	26	116	10
Oldham	5	42	2
Rochdale	3	26	2
Salford	13	102	0
Stockport	1	30	9
Tamside	9	52	0

Permanent exclusions from maintained primary, secondary and special schools and non-maintained special schools in the 1994–95 school year

LEA area	Number of permanent exclusions		
	Primary	Secondary	Special
Trafford	6	37	4
Wigan	6	47	2
Barnsley	0	16	0
Doncaster	6	92	7
Rotherham	4	45	1
Sheffield	16	73	5
Bradford	2	125	1
Calderdale	4	20	0
Kirklees	14	38	2
Leeds	15	159	8
Wakefield	15	85	4
Gateshead	2	31	1
Newcastle upon Tyne	18	74	3
North Tyneside	6	53	1
South Tyneside	1	65	1
Sunderland	8	40	1
Isles of Scilly	0	0	—
Avon	49	171	26
Bedfordshire	12	117	8
Berkshire	23	167	14
Buckinghamshire	17	83	4
Cambridge	7	107	1
Cheshire	16	152	10
Cleveland	16	66	8
Cornwall	11	70	0
Cumbria	9	70	0
Derbyshire	23	136	8
Devon	22	101	16
Dorset	17	93	6
Durham	9	100	5
East Sussex	24	114	13
Essex	29	174	7
Gloucestershire	18	96	5
Hampshire	44	308	24
Hereford and Worcester	10	116	1
Hertfordshire	24	155	9
Humberside	13	91	4
Isle of Wight	1	12	0
Kent	52	289	21
Lancashire	41	272	13
Leicestershire	21	158	5
Lincolnshire	9	104	4
Norfolk	14	87	3
North Yorkshire	10	71	7
Northamptonshire	15	125	9
Northumberland	6	53	7
Nottinghamshire	25	209	4
Oxfordshire	10	36	3
Shropshire	7	99	7
Somerset	13	46	3
Staffordshire	25	226	5
Suffolk	13	103	1
Surrey	25	176	17
Warwichshire	11	60	6
West Sussex	22	94	4
Wiltshire	13	88	12
England	1,307	8,870	492

[1] No schools of this type in LEA area.

Secondary Schools (Staffordshire)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many secondary schools in Staffordshire offered the teaching of more than one foreign language to *(a)* GCSE level and *(b)* A level in the latest year for which figures are available; what assessment he has made of the advantages of all such schools offering more than one foreign language to these levels; and what plans he has to change the national curriculum requirement in respect of the number of foreign languages to be offered. [4032]

Ms Estelle Morris: The latest figures we have are for the 1995–96 school year and relate to pupils attempting GCSE or GCE A level examinations in two or more foreign languages. We do not have separate information on how many pupils were actually taught the languages. All of the seventy-one secondary schools in Staffordshire had pupils tgaking at least two GCSEs in foreign languages. The most popular languages were French, German and Spanish. Forty-six had pupils taking at least two GCE A levels in foreign languages. French and German were by far the most popular languages at that level.

All secondary schools must now teach pupils at least one modern foreign language, and they are free to offer more than one if they have the resources to do so and the demand is there. Foreign language learning is important in promoting international understanding, and in providing insights into other cultures, and our own. For the United Kingdom as a trading nation, competence in modern foreign languages is of crucial importance in an increasingly competitive world. Nineteen modern foreign languages are eligible to be National Curriculum foundation subjects.

We have promised stability in the National Curriculum at key stages 1 to 3 until the year 2000. The School Curriculum and Assessment Authority are currently monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the revised National Curriculum introduced in schools in 1995, and will provide advice to Ministers in due course on the need for and nature of any future modifications.

Teacher Training

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of people whom it will be necessary to recruit for teacher training in 1997–98 for the proper future staffing of schools. [4031]

Ms Estelle Morris: The targets for recruitment for teacher training in 1997–98, which were published in November 1996, are shown in the following table. Targets for future years will be reviewed in the autumn.

Initial teacher training intake targets in England 1997–98

Subject	Number
Mathematics	2,250
English	1,950
Drama	200
Science	3,300
Modern Languages	2,650
Technology	3,200
History	900
Geography	900
Physical Education	1,550
Art	950
Music	600
Religious Education	700
Other	350
Total secondary	19,500
Total primary	11,000

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people were recruited for teacher training in all main subject areas in each of the last five years; and what are the projected figures for the 1997–98 academic year. [4030]

Ms Morris: The following table shows the number of new entrants to teacher training for the years 1992–93 to 1996–97. The Department does not make projections of future entrants.

Initial teacher training actual intake in each subject area since 1992

England only

	1992–93	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Primary	16,658	15,775	13,743	13,603	12,465
Secondary					
Maths	1,699	1,790	1,950	1,795	1,653
English	1,368	1,483	1,829	1,877	2,093
Science	2,148	2,397	2,918	2,794	2,937
Languages	1,384	1,550	1,789	1,790	1,720
Technology	2,216	2,160	2,133	1,854	1,963
History	598	680	927	872	937
Geography	474	600	636	696	842
PE	1,153	1,084	1,309	1,311	1,384
Art	579	704	754	818	904
Music	422	461	490	548	507
RE	353	368	448	494	647
Other	457	415	327	378	378
All Secondary	12,849	13,689	15,509	15,226	15,965
Total	29,507	29,464	29,252	28,829	28,430

From 1993–94 includes School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT). English includes Drama.
Technology includes Business Studies and Home Economics.
Other includes Classics, Economics and Social Sciences.
Source:
1992–93 to 1993–94 DfE Recruitment Survey, 1994–95 HESES, 1995–96 to 1996–97 TTA Survey of ITT Providers.

Post-16 Education

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to encourage children to remain in the education system after the age of 16 years; and if he will make a statement. [3669]

Dr. Howells: We are currently developing a range of measures to encourage young people to continue their education after the age of 16, which will carry forward the commitments made in our election manifesto within the limitations of current public expenditure plans. This will be our Target 2000 programme. I hope to be able to make an early announcement on the details of a number of initiatives.

School Leavers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of *(a)* female and *(b)* male children leave school at 16 years, broken down into local authority areas; and if he will make a statement. [3668]

Dr. Howells: The following table shows the percentage of 16 year olds who had left school by LEA in 1994–95. Many who leave school at 16 will continue with their education and training, for example in further education colleges, sixth form colleges or in the workplace. Figures for males and females separately could only be made available at disproportionate cost.

School leavers aged 16 by LEA, England, 1994–95

	Percentage
London	
Inner London	61
Barking	60
Barnet	43
Bexley	58
Brent	60
Bromley	39
Croydon	71
Ealing	61
Enfield	49
Haringey	64
Harrow	82
Havering	82
Hillingdon	50
Hounslow	41
Kingston upon Thames	38
Merton	68
Newham	92
Redbridge	40
Richmond upon Thames	66
Sutton	39
Waltham Forest	85
Metropolitan authorities	
Birmingham	70
Coventry	59
Dudley	96
Sandwell	84
Solihull	71
Walsall	57
Wolverhampton	56
Knowsley	85
Liverpool	52
St. Helens	73
Sefton	61
Wirral	56
Bolton	76

School leavers aged 16 by LEA, England, 1994–95

	Percentage
Bury	87
Manchester	82
Oldham	79
Rochdale	85
Salford	99
Stockport	83
Tameside	98
Trafford	73
Wigan	94
Barnsley	95
Doncaster	58
Rotherham	70
Sheffield	81
Bradford	55
Calderdale	57
Kirklees	78
Leeds	60
Wakefield	72
Gateshead	68
Newcastle upon Tyne	49
North Tyneside	64
South Tyneside	93
Sunderland	88
Counties	
Avon	56
Bedfordshire	59
Berkshire	43
Buckinghamshire	47
Cambridgeshire	66
Cheshire	62
Cleveland	93
Cornwall (including Isles of Scilly)	73
Cumbria	60
Derbyshire	70
Devon	59
Dorset	52
Durham	76
East Sussex	67
Essex	72
Gloucestershire	54
Hampshire	90
Hereford and Worcester	60
Hertfordshire	40
Humberside	80
Isle of Wight	49
Kent	48
Lancashire	83
Leicestershire	62
Lincolnshire	64
Norfolk	63
North Yorkshire	60
Northamptonshire	52
Northumberland	52
Nottinghamshire	66
Oxfordshire	48
Shropshire	73
Somerset	69
Staffordshire	69
Suffolk	52
Surrey	58
Warwickshire	64
West Sussex	62
Wiltshire	66
England	65

[1] Data for individual boroughs are not reliable.

Dyslexia

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for education and Employment what plans he has to help secondary school children who suffer from dyslexia. [3973]

Ms Estelle Morris: We need first to ensure that dyslexia is picked up before children reach secondary school. The Code of Practice on the identification and assessment of special educational needs emphasises the need for the *early* identification of special educational needs. The proposals for a national curriculum for initial teacher training and baseline assessment will help teachers identify children with dyslexia when they first start school. Beyond that, the Department is currently funding a number of research projects directly related to dyslexia. One in particular at the Manchester Metropolitan University, aims to establish those practices for assessment and intervention which teachers have found effective for use in the ordinary classroom. We will make sure that the findings from these projects are disseminated to teachers.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on future funding of specialist education for children at secondary school who suffer from dyslexia. [3974]

Ms Morris: Each local education authority is responsible for setting its own budget and deciding its priorities between and within services, including special educational needs. The Government's role is to set the overall framework for the funding of local authority services nationally, and to determine the way in which national "standard spending" totals are distributed between local authorities, through the standard spending assessment system. The way in which we propose to develop policy on provision for special educational needs will be set out in the forthcoming education White Paper.

Education White Paper

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will announce the publication date of the Education White Paper; and if he will make a statement on the timetable for consultation relating to it. [4211]

Mr. Byers: The White Paper setting out the Government's agenda for raising standards in schools will be published in early July. We are planning a period of consultation going well into the Autumn term. We want all those involved in education to join in that process and are seeking the most effective ways of making sure they are aware of and can respond to the proposals. We will be setting out details of the consultation process when the White Paper is published.

Quangos

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what changes he plans to make *(a)* the role and responsibilities of quangos and *(b)* the accountability of quangos in the education sector; and if he will make a statement. [4212]

Dr. Howells: We are currently examining the role and responsibilities of each of our Non-Departmental Public Bodies, or quangos, as part of the Department's spending review. Our policy proposals concerning the

accountability of quangos, including those in the education sector, will be set out in the White Paper on Better Government announced on 3 June by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Secondary School Performance Tables

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will publish the next secondary school performance tables. [4253]

Ms Estelle Morris: We expect to publish the tables in November.

Technology, Languages, Arts and Sports Colleges

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will announce the next round of technology, language, arts and sports colleges. [4254]

Ms Estelle Morris: I am announcing today the names of the schools that are to be designated as Technology Colleges and Language Colleges as from September 1997. I hope to announce the names of those schools successful in the sports and arts competitions in early July.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the schools which have applied to his Department in the latest bidding round for technology, language, arts and sports school status. [4255]

Ms Morris: The following table are schools that have applied for specialist school designation in each of the current competitions.

Applications for technology college designation

School	*LEA*
Addey and Stanhope School	Lewisham
Admiral Lord Nelson School	Portsmouth
Amery Hill School	Hampshire
Anfield Community Comprehensive School	Liverpool
Ashfield School	Nottinghamshire
Astley Community School	Northumberland
Balcarras School	Gloucestershire
Balshaw's CE High School	Lancashire
Barclay School	Hertfordshire
Barnwood Park School for Girls	Gloucestershire
Beardwood School	Lancashire
Bedlingtonshire Community High School	Northumberland
Beverley High School	East Riding
Bicester Community College	Oxfordshire
Bishop David Brown School	Surrey
Bishop Douglass RC High School	Barnet
Bishop Luffa School	West Sussex
Bishop of Herefords Bluecoat School	Hereford and Worcester
Brighouse High School	Calderdale
Broughton Hall High School	Liverpool
Bury St. Edmunds County Upper School	Suffolk
Bushey Hall School	Hertfordshire
Castleford High School	Wakefield
Cheam High School	Sutton
Chesterton Community College	Cambridgeshire
Christ The King Catholic School	Nottinghamshire
Christleton High School	Cheshire
Clacton County High School	Essex
Cleeve School	Gloucestershire
Clough Hall School	Staffordshire
Cressex School	Buckinghamshire
Davison C of E High School for Girls	West Sussex
Deanes School	Essex
Deben High School	Suffolk
Ernulf Community School	Cambridgeshire
Featherstone High School	Wakefield
Gable Hall School	Essex
Gordano School	North Somerset
Great Yarmouth High School	Norfolk
Greenhead Grammar School	Bradford
Hampstead School	Camden
Harper Green School	Bolton
Hartsdown School	Kent
Haybridge High School	Hereford and Worcester
Hazel Grove High School	Stockport
Highams Park School	Waltham Forest
Ilfracombe College	Devon
John Port School	Derbyshire
John Roan School	Greenwich
King Edward VII Upper School	Leicestershire
King Harold GM School	Essex
King John School	Essex
Kingsway High School	Cheshire
Longbenton Community College	North Tyneside
Longsands Community College	Cambridgeshire
Lutterworth Grammar School	Leicestershire
Lytham St. Annes High School	Lancashire
Mellow Lane School	Hillingdon
Moor Park High School	Lancashire
Moseley School	Birmingham
National School	Nottinghamshire
Oak Farm Community School	Hampshire
Oakwood High School	Manchester
Okehampton College	Devon
Plessington Catholic High School	Wirral
Princess Margaret Royal Free School	Berkshire
Priory Community School	North Somerset
Queen Elizabeth Grammar	Cumbria
Queen Mary's Grammar School	Walsall
Queensbury School	Bedfordshire
Raines Foundation School	Tower Hamlets
Reigate School	Surrey
Richard Challoner School	Kingston upon Thames
Richard Lander School	Cornwall
Robert Smyth School	Leicestershire
Rudheath County High School	Cheshire
Sacred Heart Comprehensive School	Redcar and Cleveland
Salesian College	Wandsworth
Saltash Community School	Cornwall
Shaw House School	Berkshire
Southfields Community College	Wandsworth
Southlands High School	Lancashire
Speedwell School	Bristol
St. Anthony's Girls School	Sunderland
St. Thomas Becket RC School	Knowsley
St. Birinus School	Oxfordshire
St. Georges School	Hertfordshire
St. John's School	Wiltshire
St. Marks West Essex Catholic School	Essex
St. Mary's RC High School	Wigan
St. Matthews RC High School	Manchester
St. Michael's RC School	Stockton on Tees
St. Thomas More Catholic Comprehensive School	Walsall
Steyning Grammar School	West Sussex
Stockport School	Stockport
The Ridings High School	South Gloucestershire
Thomas Alleynes High School	Staffordshire
Thomas Sumpter School	North Lincolnshire
Thornton Grammar School	Bradford
Tideway School and Sixth Form Centre	East Sussex

Applications for technology college designation

School	*LEA*
Varndean School	East Sussex
Wade Deacon County High School	Cheshire
Wilsthorpe School	Derbyshire
Withywood Community School	Bristol
Wollaston School	Northamptonshire
Woolwich Polytechnic	Greenwich

Applications for language college designation received

School	*LEA*
All Saints RC School	Sheffield
Aston Manor School	Birmingham
Bournmouth School	Bournemouth
Carisbrooke High School	Isle of Wight
Cliff Park High School	Norfolk
Cromer High School	Norfolk
Didcot Girls' High School	Oxfordshire
Helenswood School	East Sussex
Hollingworth High School	Rochdale
Hockerill Anglo European School	Hertfordshire
Imberhorne School	West Sussex
King Edward VII School	Sheffield
Little Lever School	Bolton
Our Lady's Convent High School	Hackney
Our Lady's RC High School	Lancashire
Parrs Wood High School	Manchester
Penrice School	Cornwall
Saint George's CE School	Kent
Slough Grammar School	Berkshire
St. Mary's RC High School	Derbyshire
St. Nicholas RC High School	Cheshire
Thorncliffe School	Cumbria
Greenford High School	Ealing
Haydon School	Hillingdon
The Douay Martyrs School	Hillingdon
Monks Park School	City of Bristol
The Grey Coat Hospital	Westminster
Sir Thomas Rich's School	Gloucstershire

Applications for arts college designation received by 16 May

School	*LEA*
Aylwin Girl's School	Southwark
Brakenhale School	Berkshire
Brentwood Ursuline Convent High School	Essex
Bridgewater County High School	Cheshire
Chestnut Grove School	Wandsworth
France Hill School	Surrey
Fred Longworth High School	Wigan
Heathfield Community School	Somerset
Intake High School	Leeds
John Masefield High School	Hereford and Worcestershire
Lealands High School	Luton
Newall Green High School	Manchester
Shirley High School	Surrey
St. Marylebone High School	Westminster
Stantonbury Campus	Milton Keynes
Westfield Community School	Somerset
Wrockwardine Wood School	Shropshire

Applications for sports college designation received by 16 May

School	*LEA*
Altwood School	Berkshire
Angmering School	West Sussex
Ashton on Mersey School	Trafford

Applications for sports college designation received by 16 May

School	*LEA*
Biddick School	Sunderland
Cardinal Newman Catholic School and Community College	Coventry
Chatham Grammar School for Boys	Kent
Crown Woods Chool	Greenwich
Deane's School	Essex
Desborough School	Berkshire
Haydon Bridge High School	Northumberland
Herne Bay High School	Kent
Ivybridge Community College	Devon
Langdon Comprehensive School	Newham
Lostock High School	Trafford
Marple Hall School	Stockport
Meadway School	Berkshire
Newport Free Grammar School	Essex
Oldfield School	Bath and North east Somerset
Park House School	Berkshire
Poltair Community School	Cornwall
Sittingbourne Community College	Kent
Wright Robinson High School	Manchester
Wye Valley High School	Buckinghamshire

Sex Equality Branch

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if officials from the sex equality branch of his Department will be transferred to the Department of Social Security. [4257]

Dr. Howells: The secretariat of the independent Women's National Commission has been transferred to the Department of Social Security along with five other officials from the Sex and Race Equality Division in my Department. The rest of that Division will continue to deal with issues affecting equality of opportunity for men and women (and racial equality) in education, training and employment.

Class Sizes (Buckinghamshire)

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each primary school in Buckinghamshire the current numbers in each class at ages *(a)* five, *(b)* six and *(c)* seven years. [4258]

Mr. Byers: The information is not available in the form requested.

School Attendance

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he plans to take against parents who do not ensure that children under 16 years attend school. [4259]

Ms Estelle Morris: Unauthorised absence blights pupils' educational chances. With our partners in the education service we will be examining the scope for reinforcing parents' understanding of their legal responsibilities for ensuring regular attendance at school, including wider use of home/school agreements. We will also be consulting about new guidance for schools and LEAs drawing on good practice in effective follow-up of unjustified absences and will encourage greater use of existing enforcement powers where appropriate.

Surplus School Places

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by local education authority the number of surplus places at *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary level schools. [4260]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer the hon. Member to the reply the former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the then Member for Hornchurch, gave to the former Member for Eltham, now the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) on Monday 27 January 1997, *Official Report*, columns *99–102*.

Travellers' Children

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what resources he will make available to ensure that travellers' children attend school; and what action he will take to ensure their attendance. [4261]

Ms Estelle Morris: In the current financial year 1997–98, the specific grant paid under Section 488 of the Education Act 1996 will be supporting some £10 million of expenditure to meet the additional educational needs of Traveller children. The grant provides in the main for the employment of specialist teachers and education welfare officers to help ensure that Traveller children have full access to school, and that parents know and comply with their responsibilities for their children's attendance.

Nursery Education

Mrs. Gillian Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost to local education authorities of gathering and documenting the necessary evidence from providers to justify payments for nursery children. [4153]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* The costs to local education authorities of administering the new arrangements for early years education should be less than those of administering the nursery education voucher scheme.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Identity Documents (Elections)

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will include passports from New Zealand and other commonwealth countries in the list of identity documents required to allow an elector to vote in Northern Ireland elections. [1317]

Dr. Mowlam: There are currently 53 members of the Commonwealth all of which issue passports in differing formats and numerous languages. Adding some or indeed all of these documents to the list of specified documents would place an unreasonable burden on polling station officials who already have to be familiar with the standardised passport issued by member states of the European Union. It would be unrealistic to expect the Chief Electoral Officer's staff to recognise and verify the authenticity of such a range of documents which could increase the opportunities for forgery and abuse of the system.

Job Creation

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many jobs were created by the Industrial Development Board from 1 April 1996 to 31 March 1997; how many were the result of inward investment contracts; and what are the locations of these jobs. [3062]

Mr. Ingram: Information on job creations is not available in the manner requested or by location. However, details of jobs promoted by the Industrial Development Board in 1996–97 are available by district council area and are set out in the table. The Industrial Development Board's own research shows that companies create approximately 70 per cent. of all promoted jobs over a period of three to five years after acceptance of the Industrial Development Board's offer of assistance.

Jobs promoted by the Industrial Development Board 1 April 1996 to 31 March 1997

District council area	*Total jobs promoted*	*Inward investment jobs included in total jobs*
Antrim	35	20
Ards	—	—
Armagh	11	—
Ballymena	290	290
Ballymoney	73	73
Banbridge	40	—
Belfast	930	781
Carrickfergus	76	—
Castlereagh	85	44
Coleraine	68	—
Cookstown	39	—
Craigaon	132	45
Derry	543	340
Down	38	—
Dungannon	434	344
Fermanagh	95	—
Larne	369	369
Limavady	789	759
Lisburn	706	566
Magherafelt	51	—
Moyle	—	—
Newry and Mourne	152	131
Newtownabbey	805	779
North Down	14	—
Omagh	115	—
Strabane	115	100
Total	6,005	4,641

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement about job creation and industrial development in Northern Ireland, with particular reference to inward investment in South Down. [3061]

Mr. Ingram: The Government attaches a high priority to strengthening the Northern Ireland economy and a key component of this is the activity of the Department of Economic Development and its Economic Development Agencies to help Northern Ireland companies become internationally competitive and to attract high quality internationally mobile investments leading to growth in durable employment.

The industrial development board's remit of attracting inward investment extends to all parts of Northern Ireland, including the South Down area. Under this remit

particular emphasis is placed on encouraging investments to locate in disadvantaged areas and parts of the South Down constituency fall within these designated areas.

Inward Investment

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the inward investment projects where there is a reduction in the number of jobs in 1996–97. [3064]

Mr. Ingram: It is quite normal for company employment to fluctuate in response to market forces and technological developments. This is reflected in the individual employment patterns of nearly 220 externally-owned companies of which 95 per cent. experienced increases or decreases during 1996–97, resulting in a net employment increase of over 400 jobs.

Three externally-owned companies closed during the year, detailed in the following table:

Company	*Employment at 31 March 1996*
AVM Telecom Ltd.	7
Benelux Manufacturing (NI) Ltd.	231
Blackers Mill Ltd.	54

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many visits were made to each *(a)* parliamentary constituency and *(b)* district council area by potential inward investors in each financial year since 1992; and how many of the potential investors were brought by the Industrial Development Board to South Down. [3063]

Mr. Ingram: The information required to answer part (a) is not available and would involve disproportionate costs to extract. Visits arranged by IDB to Northern Ireland District Council Areas for potential investors in the last four years are detailed in the attached table. Comparable figures for 1992–93 are not available and would involve disproportionate costs to extract.

Visits to district council areas by potential investors

	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Antrim	15	26	18	34
Ards	4	5	3	10
Armagh	0	1	1	4
Ballymena	5	13	3	0
Ballymoney	0	3	1	3
Banbridge	0	2	3	1
Belfast	63	65	55	62
Carrickfergus	6	13	7	22
Castlereagh	4	1	8	6
Coleraine	12	5	3	7
Cookstown	2	4	17	10
Craigavon	7	12	16	15
Derry	19	18	30	32
Down	2	10	2	3
Dungannon	12	13	9	4
Fermanagh	5	3	11	15
Larne	4	6	4	1
Limavady	4	3	2	7
Lisburn	8	19	41	31
Magherafelt	1	2	4	0
Moyle	1	0	0	0
Newry and Mourne	8	15	16	9
Newtownabbey	27	17	19	22
North Down	8	4	9	3
Omagh	1	2	6	8
Strabane	0	2	9	10
Total	218	265	297	319

Visits to District Council Areas for other than inward investment purposes are not included in these figures, e.g. visits to tourist attractions.

Beef Export Ban

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what discussions she had with *(a)* ministerial colleagues in the EU Agriculture Council of Ministers and *(b)* the European Commission concerning the removal of the export ban on beef produced in Northern Ireland; and what was the outcome of the discussions. [3065]

Mr. Murphy: To date I have not had the opportunity to meet either with Ministerial colleagues in the EU Agriculture Council of Ministers or with the European Commission. However, my right hon. Friend, the Minister for Agriculture Fisheries and Food, who represents the UK on agricultural matters in the EU, met with Commissioner Fischler on 12 May, and with Commissioner Bonino prior to his attendance at the Agriculture Council of Ministers on 20–21 May. He also visited the European Parliament. At these meetings, Dr. Cunningham indicated the Government's determination to secure a lifting of the ban for all regions of the UK in accordance with the Florence Agreement. The Minister has also met with the Dutch President of the Council and has further plans to meet individual Council members. Further meetings with Commission officials are taking place in the wake of the Scientific Veterinary Committee's report of 11 June.

School Leavers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of *(a)* female and *(b)* male children leave school at 16 in Northern Ireland, broken down into local authority areas; and if he will make a statement. [3659]

Mr. Worthington: The information requested is as follows:

Percentage of 16-year-old pupils leaving school in 1994–95 (expressed as a proportion of all pupils in year 12)

Per cent.

Education and Library Board	*Female*	*Male*
Belfast	25	42
Western	50	61
North-eastern	50	69
South-eastern	54	66
Southern	46	62

It should be pointed out that many young people who leave school at 16 enter further education. in 1995–96 the proportion of 16 and 17-year-olds in full-time education (at school or FE college) in Northern Ireland was 71 per cent., and the proportion of young people entering full-time higher education by the age of 21 was 40 per cent.

Performance Targets

Mr. Desmond Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what performance targets have been set for the Planning Service in 1997–98. [4568]

Dr. Mowlam: For 1997–98 the following performance targets have been set for the Planning Service.

Volume of Output

1. To adopt the Larne Area Plan by 31 March 1998.

Quality of Service

1. To raise customer satisfaction relative to the determination of planning applications by 5 per cent.

2. To take 75 per cent. of minor planning applications to District Council within eight weeks of receipt.

3. To take 60 per cent. of major planning applications to District Council within eight weeks of receipt.

4. To issue 50 per cent. of all decisions on planning applications within seven working days of final Council consultation.

5. To reduce the proportion of invalid planning applications by 10 per cent.

6. To issue responses to 92 per cent. of property enquiries within 10 working days of receipt.

Efficiency

1. To achieve efficiency gains of 3 per cent. in running costs expenditure.

2. To establish by June 1997 targets for reducing unit costs for determination of planning applications and processing property enquiries.

Financial performance

1. To maintain expenditure within cash limits and to approved budget plans.

2. To maintain full recovery of the costs of determining planning applications.

3. To maintain full recovery of the costs of responding to property enquiries.

Mr. Desmond Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what performance targets have been set for the Roads Service in 1997–98. [4569]

Dr. Mowlam: For 1997–98 the following performance targets have been set for Roads Service:

Finance

1. To maintain expenditure within cash limits and to approved budget plans.

2. Within the provision allocated, deliver an overall efficiency saving of 3 per cent. in running costs.

Output/effectiveness

3. To maintain the Motorway network so that the proportion with a residual life[1] of more than five years exceeds 85 per cent.

4. To maintain the Regional Route Network so that the proportion with a residual life of more than five years exceeds 75 per cent.

5. To maintain the condition of other roads so that the overall Road Condition Index[2] does not exceed 85 per cent.

6. To reduce by 40 per cent. the total number of injury accidents occurring at treated sites over the three years following the works.

Quality of customer service

7. To achieve consistently the key standards of service set out in the Road User's Charter Statement.

Efficiency

8. The unit cost of managing the road network to be 2 per cent. lower, in real terms, than the 1996–1997 outturn figure.

[1] The maximum period remaining before the road will require major reconstruction. The higher the residual life figure, the better the condition.

[2] Obtained from analysing the results of inspection surveys covering a sample of the network. The lower the condition index figure, the better the condition.

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what performance targets have been set for the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service in 1997–98. [4570]

Dr. Mowlam: For 1997–98 the following performance targets have been set for EHS:-

Volume of output

1. Further develop effective regulation of discharges from Water Service installations including the preparation of effluent standards for 20 water treatment plans and placing these on the public register.

2. Bring about a 10 per cent. reduction in the number of "high" and "medium" severity pollution incidents by the year 2000 on 1996 figures.

3. Complete independent audit of all 32 municipal waste landfill sites and produce recommendations for compliance with new controls.

4. Submit proposals for the designation of four additional Special Protection Areas under the EC Birds' Directive and declare 25 Areas of Special Interest.

5. Undertake details habitat survey of 1,500 hectares.

6. Schedule 70 historic monuments to bring the total to 1,295.

7. Complete the re-survey of historic buildings in 30 wards.

8. Develop and produce 50 new information/education products (including publications and exhibitions).

Quality of customer service

9. Produce a round the clock response for all water pollution incidents reported and begin investigation of such incidents within 24 hours.

10. Respond to 90 per cent. of written enquiries or requests for information within 15 working days.

11. Issue 82 per cent. of licences, registrations, authorisations and consents within the timescales quoted in customer service guides.

Efficiency

12. Achieve 3 per cent. efficiency gains on running cost expenditure.

Financial performance

13. Monitor and maintain expenditure within cash limits.

14. Develop unit cost measures for appropriate activities.

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what performance targets have been set for Driver and Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland in 1997–98. [4571]

Mr. Mowlam: For 1997–98 the following key performance targets have been set for the Agency:

Output

1. To dispatch 96 per cent. of Registration Books for new vehicles in 16 working days from receipt.

2. To dispatch 95 per cent. of Refunds of vehicle excise duty in 10 working days from receipt.

3. To dispatch 94 per cent. of vehicle excise licenses in 5 working days from receipt of postal applications.

4. To dispatch 95 per cent. of Duplicate Vehicle Registration Books in 6 working days from receipt of applications.

5. To dispatch 90 per cent. of ordinary Driving Licenses in 9 working days of receipt of applications.

6. To dispatch 90 per cent. of vocational Driving Licenses in 9 working days from receipt of applications.

7. To dispatch 90 per cent. of provisional Driving Licenses in 9 working days from receipt of applications.

8. To dispatch substantive replies to 96 per cent. of written enquiries for information from the drivers and vehicles registers in 3 working days from receipt.

Efficiency

9. To limit maximum waiting at Local Vehicle Licensing Offices so that 95 per cent. of customers are attended to within 22 minutes during peak periods (the first eight and last two working days of each month) and within 10 minutes at other periods.

10. To meet an overall efficiency gain of 2.5 per cent.

Financial

11. To reduce the unit cost per vehicle excise enforcement case by 0.5 per cent. in real terms compared to 1996–97.

Quality

12. To limit the error rate (errors on any item sent out by the Agency) to a maximum of 0.5 per cent. of total Agency output.

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what performance targets have been set for the Construction Service in 1997–98. [4572]

Dr. Mowlam: For 1997–98 the following performance targets have been set for Construction Service:

Quality of service

1. To achieve a 90 per cent. compliance in customer assessments of Agency performance against Service Level Agreements.

2. To place 75 per cent. of orders within 7 days of receipt of customer requests in the maintenance and supplies business areas.

3. To achieve a 90 per cent. positive response in customer assessments in project evaluation reports.

4. To respond to 80 per cent. of customer advisory enquiries within 6 weeks.

Efficiency

5. To achieve 3 per cent. efficiency gains on running cost expenditure.

6. To ensure that overhead costs as a percentage of chargeable time value come within the agreed percentage.

7. To ensure that staff time charged to customers is within the agreed percentage of total staff time.

Financial

8. To maintain expenditure within cash limits and to approved budget plans.

9. To recover the full cost of Agency operations from customers.

10. To ensure that actual costs as a percentage of approved target costs in project work does not exceed the agreed percentage.

11. To ensure that staff costs as a percentage of construction spend in the maintenance and supplies business areas does not exceed the agreed percentage.

Mrs. Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what performance targets have been set for the Rivers Agency for the financial year 1997–98. [4719]

Dr. Mowlam: The following Key Targets have been set for the Rivers Agency for 1997–98:

To construct or refurbish 2.0 km of urban flood defences.

To increase the length of designated sea defences having appropriate standards of protection to 29 per cent.

To accommodate increased storm run-off from 350 hectares of development land.

To replace/refurbish 2.1 km of dangerous culverts.

To complete maintenance works on 376 km of urban watercourses and 1,370 km of rural watercourses.

To provide new water recreation facilities at 25 sites throughout Northern Ireland.

To issue substantive replies to 80 per cent. of written enquiries within 15 working days of receipt.

To respond to 100 per cent. of Schedule 6 applications within 3 months.

To aim to have all navigation locks operable for at least 90 per cent. of the period.

To control programmes expenditure to within 0.5 per cent. shortfall of the final control total.

To control DRC expenditure to within 1 per cent. shortfall of the final control total.

To achieve 3 per cent. efficiency savings in the 1997–98 financial year.

To implement Phase II of the development of Management Information Systems and databases to establish unit costs for protecting land from flooding and maintaining drainage benefit to agricultural land.

The Rivers Agency Business Plan for 1997–98 will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament at a later date.

Food Poisoning

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much her Department has spent on research into food poisoning in each of the last five years, broken down to show the funds dedicated to *(a)* E. coli, *(b)* campylobacter and *(c)* salmonella. [3605]

Mr. Worthington *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* The amount spent on research into food poisoning in each of the areas listed is as follows:

Year	*E. coli*	*Campylobacter*	*Salmonella*
1992–93	24.9	25.3	6.7
1993–94	37.2	99.4	5.1
1994–95	55.8	110.4	4.0
1995–96	38.5	117.4	8.8
1996–97	45.0	58.0	5.4

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much her Department has budgeted for research into food-poisoning in 1997–98, broken down to show the funds dedicated to *(a)* E. coli, *(b)* campylobacter and *(c)* salmonella. [3606]

Mr. Worthington *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* The amount budgeted for research into each of the areas is as follows:

Year	*E. coli*	*Campylobacter*	*Salmonella*
1997–98	80.2	88.0	5.6

SOCIAL SECURITY

War Pensions Agency (Conference)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations she has received about the cost of the recent conference of War Pensions Agency staff in Windermere; and what assessment she has made of the value for money of that conference. [4150]

Mr. Denham: One of our key aims is that delivery of service should be simpler and more efficient. Queries on operational matters concerning the War Pensions Agency are for its Chief Executive Mr. Kevin Caldwell. I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from K. C. Caldwell to Mr. Hilton Dawson, dated 7 June 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your Parliamentary Question about the recent conference of war pensions staff.

The Secretary of State has received no representations regarding the conference.

As Chief Executive of the War Pensions Agency, approval of a conference of this nature falls within my authority. My approval of the conference followed normal Departmental guidelines and I am content that the conference represented good value for money.

The Agency does not maintain on-site facilities that would be appropriate for a conference of this nature.

The conference, involving 26 delegates of all grades within the Agency, was designed to identify how the Agency could improve the levels of service offered to war pensioners. As you may be aware, the Agency has made significant recent improvements in service levels as measured against Secretary of State targets and to continue this improvement it is important that we seek to identify and resolve any significant barriers to service or performance improvement. The action plans and detailed task lists which were created will help the hundreds of staff in the operational group at the Agency to sustain improved performance. Another great advantage of this event was the opportunity to enthuse and motivate the people who attended—as an accredited Investors in People organisation we look for opportunities to do this.

Events of this nature are extremely rare in the Agency (this is the first in my term as Chief Executive) and are strictly limited to circumstances where the benefit clearly outweighs the cost. I have no hesitation in providing my personal assurance that the conference represented good value for money.

I hope you find this information useful.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people *(a)* in total and *(b)* under the age of 25 years have lost entitlement to benefit following the introduction of the jobseeker's allowance. [1465]

Mr. Bradley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

Transitional provisions ensured that people who were in receipt of Unemployment Benefit and/or Income Support for the unemployed at the point of change kept entitlement to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).

Jobseekers lose entitlement to JSA if they fail to be available for work, to seek work actively, or to have a jobseeker's agreement in place. Just under 7,000 people lost entitlement for these reasons between 7 October and 31 December 1996, the latest date for which information is available. Additionally JSA payments (but not underlying entitlement) cease if jobseekers are sanctioned. There were just over 21,000 sanctions in this same period. Separate figures for under 25 year olds are not available.

Jobseekers who can demonstrate that they would otherwise suffer hardship can receive hardship payments.

Our welfare to work programme will help get young unemployed people, long term unemployed people and lone mothers off benefit and into work.

Notes:

1. Discretionary sanctions of up to 26 weeks may be imposed for voluntarily leaving employment, for misconduct or for refusal of employment.

2. Fixed period sanctions of 2 or 4 weeks may be imposed, for example, for refusing an employment programme or failure to comply with official directions.

Source:

Analysis of Adjudication Officers Decisions: Quarterly Publication.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to change the regulations covering the formulae used by the CSA to assess liability for payments; and if she will make a statement. [1652]

Mr. Bradley: We are aware of the concerns which have been expressed about the child support formula. We will be looking closely at this area over the coming months as part of our wider consideration of the Child Support Agency.

Mr. Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what analysis she has made of the proportion of absent parents with a full maintenance assessment who are paying maintenance through the Child Support Agency. [4508]

Mr. Bradley: Recent figures show that only some 32 per cent. of absent parents with a full maintenance assessment and making payment through the Child Support Agency are paying the full amount due.

Children are entitled to the support of both parents wherever they live. Absent parents need to fulfil their responsibilities. It is not acceptable that so many do not pay the maintenance they owe. Over the coming months we will be looking closely at all aspects of the operations of the Child Support Agency to ensure that it provides an efficient and effective service.

Habitual Residence Test

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to issue a national definition of the habitual residence test. [2360]

Mr. Bradley: We are committed to a wide ranging review of Social Security. We aim to restore confidence in the system and reduce levels of poverty. The habitual residence test will form part of this work.

Mortgage Benefit

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to introduce a mortgage benefit to enable people with mortgages, who are on income support, to afford to return to work. [2361]

Mr. Bradley: We have no immediate plans to introduce a mortgage benefit. However, this Government is committed to streamlining and modernising the tax and benefit systems to fulfil the objectives of promoting work incentives, reducing poverty and welfare dependency, and strengthening community and family life.

We recently announced that Martin Taylor (the Chief Executive of Barclays PLC) will lead a Whitehall Task Force to look at the problems caused by the interaction of the tax and benefit systems. The review will consider the difficulties people face on moving from welfare to work.

Pensions

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will review the link between the basic pension and prices. [3275]

Mr. Denham: We will shortly be announcing details of a review of the central areas of insecurity for elderly people. We are committed to the Basic State Pension and will retain it as the foundation of pension provision. It will be increased at least in line with prices. All aspects of the basic pension will be included in our review.

Minister for Women

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement on the responsibilities of the Parliamentary Secretary for Women; and how many officials and at what grades have been appointed with responsibility in this area. [4256]

Ms Harman: As Minister for Women, I have been given the responsibility to co-ordinate and drive forward policies which will make a real difference to women's lives. I will chair the new Cabinet Sub-Committee for Women, which will review and develop the Government's policy and strategy on issues of special concern to women and oversee their implementation, and I will examine economic and social papers going to Cabinet Sub-Committees to monitor their impact on women. My objectives are to create a new bond of trust between women and Government and to ensure that the Government delivers its promises to women, including manifesto commitments on issues such as family-friendly employment, a national childcare strategy and domestic violence.

I will be supported in this role by Joan Ruddock MP, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and at official level by a new Women's Unit. The resourcing of the Women's Unit is still under consideration but the current staff profile (full-time equivalents) is as follows:"

1 Grade 5 (Head of the Women's Unit)

1.8 Grade 7s

2.4 SEOs

1 HEO

3 EOs

1 AO

2 AAs

1 Personal Secretary

This includes the six staff that make up the Secretariat of the Women's National Commission.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State is supported by a Private Office consisting of 1 HEO, 1 EO and an AO.

Single Claimants

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to review the regulations restricting the eligibility of single claimants other than young people to accommodation costs; and if she will make a statement. [4205]

Ms Harman: I gave a commitment before the last election that I would review the regulations which extend the single room rent to people aged 25 or over. These limit housing benefit to the average market rent for a single non-self contained room.

I have considered carefully the view of the Social Security Advisory Committee that without a thorough review of the effect of the existing single room rent rules—which were only introduced in October 1996—the Government should not extend them. I have also taken account of representations from hon. Members, the Local Authority Associations and others.

In order to avoid local authorities incurring unnecessary costs, I can announce today that I propose to revoke the extension of single room rent to those aged 25 or over.

In line with the manifesto commitment, the cost of this change will be met in full by other measures from within the Department's programme. A further announcement will be made at the time of the Budget.

DEFENCE

Water Jets (Sheep's Eyes)

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the findings of the Porton Down research programme into the effect of high pressure water jets on sheep's eyes. [2785]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mrs. Ann Clwyd, dated 18 June 1997:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the findings of the Porton Down research programme into the effect of high pressure water jets on sheep's eyes as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency.

Porton Down are not aware of any research programme to investigate the effect of high pressure water jets on sheep's eyes. Some research work of this type involving another animal species was conducted during the 1970's as I said in my letter to you of 5 February. I am, however, unable to give you any additional information or to release the study report, since it remains classified.

I am sorry I cannot be more helpful.

Trident

Mr. McAllion: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what will be the cost to his Department of ordering Trident missiles from the United States of America in US Fiscal Years 1998 and 1999. [3339]

Mr. Spellar: Final decisions have yet to be taken on further UK orders for Trident missiles. For an indication of missile costs, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) on 11 June 1997, *Official Report*, columns *486–87*.

Mr. McAllion: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has to order Trident missiles from the United States of America in US Fiscal years 1998 and 1999. [3340]

Mr. Spellar: The present planning assumption is that the UK will order 7 missiles in each of US Fiscal years 1998 and 1999. This assumption will be tested during the Strategic Defence Review before final decisions are made.

Caerwent Military Base

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement about contamination at the Caerwent military base; [3574]

(2) what representations he has received about the future use of the Caerwent military base; [3575]

(3) what plans he has for the future of the Caerwent military base. [3573]

Mr. Spellar: No decisions have yet been taken on the future of the RAF Caerwent site. Consideration of the way forward will include an assessment of the contamination of the site and take into account the wishes of the local community. The site contains some residual contamination resulting from its former use as a propellant factory and ammunition depot and some buildings contain asbestos. A land quality assessment is currently being conducted.

My Department has received numerous representations regarding the future use of the RAF Caerwent site; notably from the previous hon. Member for Monmouth and the Monmouthshire county council as well as from local interest groups, land owners and private companies.

COPEX Exhibition, Farnborough

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will identify by name, rank and unit, such Indonesian *(a)* military, *(b)* security, *(c)* police, *(d)* paramilitary and *(e)* special forces personnel invited by the British Government or private companies to attend the forthcoming COPEX Exhibition at Farnborough in September 1997. [3590]

Mr. Spellar: The Society of British Aerospace Companies (SBAC) have a licence from the Ministry of Defence to put on exhibitions at Farnborough Airfield. The Ministry of Defence is playing no part in organising the COPEX Exhibition, or in issuing invitations to the Exhibition. The Ministry of Defence has sought and received assurances from the organiser of COPEX that nothing will be allowed at the Exhibition which runs counter to the Government's policy regarding the sale of military or dual-use equipment to countries under a United Nations or European Union embargo or restriction. COPEX has confirmed that it upholds all national, local and international laws and conventions regarding these matters and that any exhibitor that is found to be acting in contravention of these laws would be reported to the relevant authorities.

Portsmouth Naval Base

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to visit Portsmouth dockyard; and if he will invite local hon. Members to accompany him on future visits. [3283]

Dr. John Reid: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State currently has no plans to visit Portsmouth Naval Base.

British Aerospace and Rolls-Royce

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list for each of the last five years the sums the Government have paid to *(a)* British Aerospace and *(b)* Rolls-Royce for defence products. [2183]

Mr. Spellar: Sums paid to British Aerospace and Rolls-Royce for each of the last 5 years by the Defence Bills Agency on behalf of the Secretary of State for Defence are shown in the following table. These figures do not include any sums which may have been paid locally including by those Defence Agencies for which figures are shown separately.

	British Aerospace £ million	*Rolls Royce £ million*
1992–93	1,045	321
1993–94	1,006	297
1994–95	820	312
1995–96	683	290
1996–97	801	282

These figures were the amounts paid in the years in question and include VAT, and were obtained from the annual Expenditure With Industry Report produced by Defence Bills Agency.

	British Aerospace £ million	*Rolls Royce £ million*
DERA		
1992–93	6.3	6
1993–94	4.9	5.3
1994–95	7.5	11.9
1995–96	11.5	4
1996–97	12.9	3.7

Total sums for goods and services.

	British Aerospace £000	*Rolls Royce £000*
Hydrographic office		
1993–94	45,825	nil
1994–95	66,002	nil
1995–96	54,003	nil

For provision of consultancy support.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Fishing Vessels

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Minster of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures the Government intends to introduce to ensure that United Kingdom-registered fishing vessels comply with the law; and if he will make a statement. [4296]

Dr. John Cunningham: The Government propose to take a range of initiatives designed to ensure that all fishing vessels in the UK abide by the rules.

The Fisheries Departments will continue to give priority to fair and effective enforcement. In 1997–98 some £24 million will be spent on enforcement, including surface and aerial surveillance. We are determined to bear down on those who disregard the law. If fish stocks are to be conserved fisheries regulations must be respected.

We have considered whether the existing conditions of fishing licences need to be strengthened to assist enforcement. A matter of particular concern is the practice of allegedly discarding, after inspection at sea but prior to landing, marketable fish which have been sorted, stowed on board and recorded in EC logbooks. This practice appears to be used to evade the proper operation of quotas and is inconsistent with the conservation of fish stocks. Subject to consultation with the Commission and our fishing industry, we propose to introduce as soon as possible a new licence condition which addresses this problem.

The Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen has powers to terminate a fishing vessel's registration if, taking into account any requirement of merchant shipping legislation relevant to its safety or that of its crew, he considers that it would be inappropriate for the vessel to remain registered. In the interests of safety, it is proposed that the Registrar General will serve notice of the intention to terminate the registration of any fishing vessel which fails to hold a valid safety certificate.

In addition, we shall be making arrangements for British Sea Fishery Officers to assist the Department of Transport by detaining in port fishing vessels which do not have valid fishing vessel safety certificates, as well as checking that fishing vessels are manned by crew holding the appropriate certificates, including UK Certificates of Equivalent Competency (CECs) in the case of foreign qualified crew.

Finally, the Department of Transport and Fisheries Departments have reviewed the requirements for masters and officers of larger fishing vessels to be competent in the use of English. It has been concluded that these provisions are adequate. Certificates of competency, including CECs, already require a sound knowledge of English. The more rigorous checking of officers' certificates will help to ensure that these requirements are properly complied within the interests of safety.

Poultry Meat

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is proposing to take in the interest of consumer safety to ensure that adequate controls are put in place to cover the production of poultry meat in premises processing fewer than 10,000 birds per year; and if he will make a statement. [4778]

Mr. Rooker: I have asked for a review to be conducted of the exemption from Poultry Meat, Farmed Game Bird Meat and Rabbit Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) Regulations 1995 of premises slaughtering fewer than 10,000 birds per year.

As part of that review, I will be seeking urgent advice from the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF) on the health risks associated with the continued sale of New York Dressed (NYD) and *effile* poultry from unlicensed premises.

Sustainable Livestock Production

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research the LINK programme on sustainable livestock production has evaluated on the competitiveness of free range *(a)* egg and *(b)* pork production relative to intensive production; and if he will make a statement. [3580]

Mr. Rooker: There are no LINK projects on the topics referred to in the question. However, the Government's role within the LINK programme is to respond to research proposals put forward by industry for joint funding. If projects of this kind were to come forward, they would be considered on their merits.

Beef Production

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the application of the early marketing and the calf processing schemes within the United Kingdom beef sector. [3925]

Mr. Rooker: Under EU law, member states must operate either the Calf Processing Scheme (CPAS) or the Early Marketing Scheme for veal, or both. The aim of both schemes is to reduce oversupply on the EU beef market following a decline in consumption. The UK has opted for the CPAS because it more directly tackles the problem of the sudden loss of markets for UK calves following the imposition of the beef export ban. As at 13 June 1997, a total of 636,471 calves had been slaughtered of which 597,044 were dairy and 39,427 non-dairy breeds.

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the advantages of giving special compensation for lowland beef farmers. [3924]

Mr. Rooker: All beef producers have been affected in varying degrees by the current low market price for finished cattle. Thus all producers, regardless of their geographical location or farming system, would urge the case for affording them special assistance. In considering any case put to us for such assistance, the Government have to be mindful of the tight constraints which currently apply to public expenditure and the extent to which the provision of such assistance would distort the proper functioning of the market. Such distortion might simply insulate producers from the realities of the market-place and encourage unrealistic expectations of the level of future returns.

Milk

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what tests his Department has authorised to determine the percentage of milk on sale which contains measurable quantities of *(a)* medicines, *(b)* illegal antibiotics and *(c)* hormones; and if he will make a statement. [3413]

Mr. Rooker: The Dairy Products (Hygiene) Regulations 1995, as amended, require manufacturers to carry out checks to ensure that dairy products do not contain residues of substances having pharmacological or hormonal action, antibiotics or other substances, which are harmful to human health, or might be harmful if those residues exceeded permitted tolerance limits laid down in legislation.

Local authority environmental health officers are responsible for ensuring compliance with the Regulations; this may include sampling and analysis. Enforcement action is taken where appropriate.

The Veterinary Medicines Directorate tests whole milk collected at the retail point of sale under their non-statutory surveillance scheme. They look for residues of a number of antibiotics and also substances prohibited under EU legislation. In 1996 they completed 1,434 analyses and, consistent with the experience of previous years, found no detectable residues.

Animal Cloning

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his policy on the cloning of animals. [3412]

Mr. Rooker: The Ministry's policy on the cloning of farm animals is guided by the recommendations of the report of the Committee to Consider the Ethical Implications of Emerging Technologies in the Breeding of Farm Animals—the Banner Committee—which reported in 1995.

Organophosphates

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy to withdraw clearance for the commercial use of organophosphates. [3389]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* We have considered this very carefully. The Government act on the scientific advice of the independent advisory committees set up by the Medicines Act 1968 and the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985. Their current advice is that organophosphourus sheep dips and pesticides can be used safely in accordance with the manufacturers' instructions. Further work is in hand to emphasis the importance of using and disposing of these products safely including an updated leaflet "Sheep Dipping" which will be sent to sheep farmers later this year. The Government attach great importance to this work.

WALES

Housing Repair Grants

12. **Mr. Rogers:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to increase the resources for local authority housing repair grants. [2605]

Mr. Win Griffiths: £164 million is available from the Welsh Office to Welsh local authorities for private sector renewal this year. Provision for future years will be subject to the outcome of the annual Public Expenditure Survey.

The Bill on Supplementary Credit Approvals, which had its Second Reading on 17 June, will provide local authorities with the capability of applying at least some of their Supplementary Credit Approvals to housing repair programmes.

Community Hospitals and Ambulance Services

13. **Mr. Öpik:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on community hospitals and ambulance service provision in Wales. [2606]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Community hospitals and ambulance services play an important role in the delivery of health services. In Wales these services are provided by NHS Trusts.

Road Improvements (Anglesey)

14. **Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received on the starting date of the A55 improvements across Anglesey. [2607]

Mr. Hain: Since the decision to progress the scheme under the Private Finance Initiative was announced in July 1996, the Department has received 43 representations about the start of work to-date.

Welsh Assembly (Monmouthshire)

15. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the representation of Monmouthshire in a devolved Welsh Assembly. [2608]

Mr. Ron Davies: Monmouthshire, like other parts of Wales, will be represented in the Assembly by both directly-elected and additional Members. Details of the proposed Additional Member System will be set out in the White Paper to be published in the summer.

Economic Priorities

16. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his economic priorities for Wales. [2609]

Mr. Ron Davies: I intend to publish an economic development strategy document later this summer. This will set out my general approach and priorities.

Devolution

17. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the annual cost of a Welsh Assembly; and if the cost will be met from the existing Welsh Office Vote. [2610]

Mr. Ron Davies: We will publish this information in the Devolution White Paper next month.

22. **Mr. Hammond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when the White Paper on devolution for Wales is to be published. [2615]

Mr. Davies: We aim to publish the White Paper before the summer recess and certainly well before the Referendum.

Single Currency

18. **Mr. Llew Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the effects of the single currency and the convergence criteria on public services in Wales. [2611]

Mr. Hain: The Government have made it clear that any decision on the single currency will be made in the interest of the UK economy as a whole. This includes our ability to deliver a level of public service which we deem desirable.

Ministerial Visit

19. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to visit North Wales to discuss health issues. [2612]

Mr. Win Griffiths: My right hon. Friend has no plans at present to visit North Wales, but as Minister with responsibility for health issues in the Welsh Office, I will be visiting trusts in the area tomorrow.

Social Chapter

20. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate the has made of the number of jobs that will be lost in Wales as a result of increased employment costs arising from the minimum wage and social chapter. [2613]

Mr. Hain: We will ask the Low Pay Commission, before it reaches a recommendation on the level at which the National Minimum Wage might be set, to take into account all the economic circumstances, including its likely impact. I will not speculate about the possible effects of hypothetical levels before the Commission has had a chance to consider the issues. Current Social Chapter directives do not impose significant burdens on business.

GP Fundholding

21. **Mr. Rhodri Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the future of GP fundholding in Wales. [2614]

Mr. Win Griffiths: We are committed to a comprehensive and equitable health service and to the abolition of the two tier system and internal market. We have deferred approval of the 8th wave of fundholding in Wales until July 1998 to provide a breathing space to allow the development of alternative commissioning models. We have also asked GMSC Wales and the Welsh Association of fundholding Practices to work with us to determine the direction of Health Care in the Principality, building on current best practice. Changes are needed to the existing arrangements but it is important that they are the right changes.

Intergovernmental Conference

23. **Mr. Charles Kennedy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will asses the implications of the outcome of the intergovernmental conference for Welsh agriculture; and if he will make a statement. [2616]

Mr. Ron Davies: An announcement on the outcome of the Intergovernmental Conference will be made in due course.

Ministerial Responsibilities

24. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement as to the allocation of ministerial responsibilities for environmental and rural matters. [2617]

Mr. Win Griffiths: I have been allocated these responsibilities.

Small Businesses

25. **Mrs. Laing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what action he is taking to encourage more small businesses to set up in Wales. [2618]

Mr. Hain: Our Manifesto for Wales identified a comprehensive package of measures in support of small firms. This includes action to encourage more new good quality enterprises, particularly high technology start ups which could help to revitalise parts of the Valleys and other disadvantaged areas. The TECs in Wales have also been set a target of assisting the unemployed to establish 1,500 new businesses in 1997–98. This total should be boosted by the New Deal package to help tackle youth and long-term unemployment.

Regional Policy

26. **Mr. Donald Anderson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he proposes to reduce the current economic regional imbalance in Wales. [2619]

Mr. Hain: We intend to publish an economic development strategy document later this summer. This will set out our general approach and priorities.

Angling

27. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the benefits of angling to the Welsh economy. [2620]

Mr. Ron Davies: We fully recognise the popularity of angling in Wales and its benefit to the Welsh rural economy. We have a long-standing commitment to angling and the protection of the aquatic environment. We intend to review legislation on salmon and freshwater fisheries in England and Wales covering all aspects of policy and management governing inland fisheries.

Beef Export Ban

28. **Mr. Livsey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of when the export ban on beef from Wales to the EU and world markets will be lifted. [2621]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The export ban has been in place for over a year now. We have fulfilled the Florence pre-conditions and we now need recognition for the measures taken and the sacrifices made. Lifting the ban will not be easy, but we hope the present Government's constructive and positive approach will pay dividends. We are exploring with the Commission how we can most quickly get the export ban lifted. As well as certified herds proposals we will be considering other options.

Inward Investment

29. **Mr. Walter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps the Government are taking to encourage more investment from foreign firms in Wales. [2622]

Mr. Hain: Our commitments to improve the skills level of our people, create a buoyant economy, improve the infrastructure, and take a positive attitude towards the

European Union, as well as our proposals to create an economic powerhouse, will make Wales even more attractive to inward investors.

Education

30. **Mr. Ruane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what changes he plans to make to education in Wales. [2623]

Mr. Hain: The Welsh Office will publish its proposals for education in Wales in a White Paper in July.

NDPBs

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what were the gross and net budgets of non-departmental public bodies in 1992–93; what are the estimated budgets for 1997–98; and what percentage increase or decrease has taken place. [2707]

Mr. Ron Davies: The information is as follows:

	Budget 1992–93 £	*Estimated budget 1997–98 £*	*Percentage change*
Gross	517,693,000	826,268,700	37.3
Net	347,742,000	701,773,700	50.4

1. The figures provides are cash prices.

2. There are 18 Executive non-departmental public bodies in existence. The Arts Council of Wales, the Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales, the Residuary Body for Wales and the Welsh Language Board were not in existence in 1992 and cannot be taken into account for the figures for 1992–93. The Further Education Funding Council for Wales and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales were established in May 1992 but did not become fully operational until April 1993.

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the cost of remuneration to members appointed by the Secretary of State to non-Departmental public bodies in 1992–93; and what is the estimated cost for 1997–98. [2706]

Mr. Davies: The cost of remuneration to members appointed by the Secretary of State to Executive non-Departmental public bodies is contained in the annual publication "Public Bodies", copies of which are available in the Library of the House.

The cost for 1992–93 was £729,914 and the estimated cost for 1997–98 is £948,750.

Referendums

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much public money at current prices was made available for the "Yes" campaign and how much for the "No" campaign in each referendum, since 1979; how much will be available for each in the forthcoming referendum; and if he will make a statement. [3287]

Mr. Ron Davies: There have been no referendums in the United Kingdom since 1979. No public money will be made available for "Yes" or "No" campaigns for the forthcoming referendum.

School Leavers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of *(a)* female and *(b)* male children leave school at 16 in Wales, broken down into local authority areas; and if he will make a statement. [3667]

Mr. Hain: The information requested is shown in the following table. The figures include children continuing in full-time education outside the school sector.

Percentage of children leaving school at age 16[1]

Per cent.

Local education authority area	*Leaving rate Males*	*Females*
Blaenau Gwent	71	63
Bridgend	59	53
Caerphilly	75	70
Cardiff	65	65
Carmarthenshire	66	58
Ceredigion	46	35
Conwy	49	41
Denbighshire	60	51
Flintshire	57	57
Gwynedd	79	70
Isle of Anglesey	63	50
Merthyr Tydfil	61	48
Monmouthshire	38	33
Neath Port Talbot	91	89
Newport	58	50
Pembrokeshire	50	43
Powys	54	46
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	58	53
Swansea	76	77
Torfaen	76	71
The Vale of Glamorgan	57	53
Wrexham	88	84
Wales	65	60

[1] Includes maintained secondary and special schools and independent schools. The leaving rate is estimated using figures from the Schools' Censuses of 1995 and 1996. It should be noted that the percentage leaving school in a locality will be influenced by the provision for further education in the locality.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women receive the jobseeker's allowance in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [1997]

Mr. Bradley: I have been asked to reply.

The information is in the table.

Reforming the welfare state is one of our key priorities. Our welfare to work programme will get young unemployed people, long term unemployed and lone mothers off benefit and into work.

Unemployed Jobseeker's allowance claimants by sex and benefit position: February 1997

Thousand

	All	*Men*	*Women*
All	1,763	1,352	411
Contribution-based JSA	247	163	83

Unemployed Jobseeker's allowance claimants by sex and benefit position: February 1997

Thousand

	All	*Men*	*Women*
Income-based JSA	1,363	1,085	278
No JSA in payment[1]	153	103	50

Notes:
[1] Claimants not entitled to contribution-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) or income-based JSA who qualify for national insurance credits. This category also includes claimants who might be entitled to contribution-based JSA, income-based JSA or national insurance credits but has not had this established at the time of the enquiry.
1. Excludes claimants on Government Training Schemes.
2. Figures may not sum due to rounding.
Source:
JSA summary statistics: February 1997 QSE.

TREASURY

Interest Rates

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 3 June, *Official Report*, column *147*, if he will state numerically what constitutes high and stable levels of growth and employment for the British economy for the financial years *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [3333]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member on June 2, *Official Report*, column *147*.

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer under what authority operational responsibility for setting official interest rates has been transferred to the Bank of England. [3602]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced on 6 May that operational responsibility for setting interest rates would be transferred to the Bank of England; that legislation placing this responsibility on a statutory footing would be introduced as soon as possible; and that, during the intervening period until the legislation came into force, all aspects of the new arrangements for making and announcing decisions on monetary policy would operate on a de facto basis.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what consideration he expects the Bank of England monetary policy committee to give to *(a)* existing and *(b)* announced fiscal policy measures in setting interest rates. [4274]

Mrs. Liddell: It is the job of the Bank's Monetary Policy Committee to set interest rates to achieve the Government's inflation target. In doing that the Committee will take into account a wide range of information, including fiscal policy measures.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of the increase in interest rates since 1 May on *(a)* inflation, *(b)* growth, *(c)* employment and *(d)* the exchange rate. [3233]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government have put in place a monetary framework designed to achieve economic stability. Economic stability is a precondition for high and stable levels of growth and employment. The Chancellor's assessment of the impact of the interest rate increase of 6 May was set out in a Treasury press release (40/97) of 6 May. The Bank has been given operational responsibility to set interest rates at a level to achieve the Government's inflation target.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) by what means the interests of *(a)* manufacturing industry and *(b)* British regions are taken into account by the Bank of England in determining interest rates; [3263]

(2) how the views and needs of manufacturing industry in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the English regions in respect of interest and exchange rates are to be assessed by the Bank's Monetary Policy Committee; and if he proposes to incorporate representatives of Scotland and the English regions in the process of considering interest rate changes. [4036]

Mrs. Liddell: In determining interest rates, the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England will be able to draw on the information gained from business surveys, and the Bank's network of regional agents which cover the whole of the United Kingdom. The bank's agents have widespread contacts with companies, both large and small, and other organisations covering all sectors of the economy.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list those OECD countries where central banks determine interest rates *(a)* without regional representation to the Bank and *(b)* without a contract between bank and Government setting out the bank's targets. [3264]

Mrs. Liddell: All central banks tend to take regional developments into account when setting interest rates. The form of regional representation, however, varies across countries with independent central banks. For example, in Germany and the US regional central bank presidents sit on the Committee determining interest rates. In contrast, there is no such regional representation in other countries, such as New Zealand. With regard to contracts, in some countries, for example Germany, central banks determine interest rates without formal agreement with the respective government. In other countries, more less formal agreements exist, as in the case of Canada.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how he proposes to co-ordinate demand management and fiscal and monetary policy following the transfer of decision-making on interest rates to the Bank of England. [3196]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government aim to achieve lasting economic stability through prudent economic management and sound finance. Co-ordination of fiscal and monetary policy will be assisted by having the Treasury representative on the Bank's Monetary Policy Committee in a non-voting capacity.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what instructions and targets he has given to the Bank of England in respect of levels of *(a)* growth, *(b)* unemployment and *(c)* inflation in its determination of interest rates; [3231]

(2) if he makes representations to the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee about his intentions and aims in respect of *(a)* growth, *(b)* unemployment, *(c)* growth in demand and *(d)* fiscal policy before its meetings. [3213]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government's central economic objectives are high and stable levels of growth and employment. The Bank of England is responsible for taking the operational decisions necessary to meet the Government's inflation target of $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. A copy of the remit for the Bank's Monetary Policy Committee and background notes can be obtained from the House of Commons Library.

Foreign Exchange Reserves

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the reason for the division of responsibility for the management of foreign exchange reserves between the Bank of England and the Treasury. [3713]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* The purpose of the bank having its own separate pool of foreign exchange reserves to use at its discretion is to allow it to intervene in support of its monetary policy objective.

Halifax Bank (Disabled Savers)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations his Department has made to the Halifax Bank in relation to its policy on distributing windfall payments to disabled savers. [3229]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* None. The broad framework with which distribution schemes must conform is set out in the Building Societies Acts. The detailed nature of any particular scheme is for a society's board and members to determine.

Bank of England Governor

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make the appointment and reappointment of the Governor of the Bank of England subject to approval by this House. [3762]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* The Governor of the Bank of England is appointed by Her Majesty the Queen. As the Chancellor said in his letter of 6 May, the Governor will be appointed for a five-year term.

Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if verbatim minutes of the monetary committee of the Bank of England will be published; and if individual members of the committee will be permitted to make dissenting statements prior to their publication. [3764]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* The monetary policy committee has agreed that the minutes will not be a verbatim record of the discussion. The committee is considering what guidelines its members should adopt in their public comments.

Ms Kelly: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if non-voting members will be permitted to take part in the deliberations of the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England. [4242]

Mrs. Liddell: The Treasury representative on the Monetary Policy Committee can take part in the discussion, but not in the decision on interest rates.

Ms Kelly: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the minutes of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee will attribute to individual members of the Committee the comments made by them during the Committee's discussions; and after what interval he proposes that the minutes will be published. [3054]

Mrs. Liddell: The votes of individual members will be recorded, and if there are dissenting votes the reasons for them will be attributed. The minutes will be published within six weeks of each meeting.

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how he will measure the success of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee in meeting his inflation target. [3322]

Mrs. Liddell: The Chancellor wrote to the Governor of the Bank of England setting out the remit for the Bank's Monetary Policy Committee on June 12. A copy of the remit can be obtained from the House of Commons Library.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will invite hon. Members to make representations to the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee. [3195]

Mrs. Liddell: The new arrangements will ensure that the Monetary Policy Committee is fully accountable for its interest rate decisions to the Government, Parliament and the people. It will be accountable to Parliament through the Treasury Select Committee, which will have the opportunity to examine the Bank's performance on monetary policy on a regular basis.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the performance of the Bank of England in managing the Government's cash reserves. [3240]

Mrs. Liddell: Currently, the Government's cash management is handled by the Bank of England as a part of its money market operations by which short-term interest rates are influenced. It is therefore difficult to separate the costs of cash management from the costs of administering monetary policy. However, the total cash needs of Government are automatically managed through coordination of the Exchequer's accounts at the Bank to minimise the amount of gross overnight borrowing required by Government.

EU Budget

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the annual net budgetary contribution by the United Kingdom to the EU; and what plans he has to discuss with his EU counterparts ways in which the size of the United Kingdom's net contribution can be reduced in the future. [3765]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* The latest estimates of the United Kingdom's net contribution to the European Community Budget for the financial year 1997–98 to 1999–2000 remain as set out in the Departmental Report published by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer on 20 March 1997 (Cm 3617) and are reproduced below:

1997–98: £2,750 million

1998–99: £3,000 million

1999–2000: £3,400 million

The Government are committed to tight control of public spending in the EU as in the UK. We shall work constructively with other Member States and the European Parliament to achieve this.

VAT (Sanitary Products)

Mr. Ivan Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will consider removing value added tax on women's sanitary products. [2259]

Dawn Primarolo: No. In a broadly based tax like VAT many essential goods and services are taxed, and it is not possible to single out sanitary protection for special treatment.

VAT on sanitary protection is included into the category of products which have been taxed at the standard rate since VAT was introduced. The EC 6th Directive, agreed in 1977, prohibits extensions of zero-rates.

Exchange Rates

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the change in *(a)* the real and *(b)* the nominal exchange rate against the (i) dollar and (ii) the deutschmark in the year after each change in interest rates over the last four years. [4276]

Mrs. Liddell: The data are available from the following published sources:

Real exchange rate: OECD Main Economic Indicators

DM exchange rate: Table 7.1A, Financial Statistics (code AJFH)

Dollar exchange rate: Table 7.1A, Financial Statistics (code AJFA)

Interest rates: Table 7.1O, Financial Statistics (code AMIH) also Table 7.1J.

Inflation

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what factors underlie his target of no more than 2.5 per cent. inflation. [3232]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government's inflation target is $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. Price stability is an essential precondition for the Government's objectives of high and sustainable levels of growth and employment.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the Government's policy for controlling inflation. [3246]

Mrs. Liddell: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out the Government's policy for controlling inflation in his statement to the House of 12 June and in his Mansion House speech of 12 June.

Mrs. May: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps the Government have taken to agree a standard definition of inflation for use throughout the European Union; and when he plans to introduce such a definition for use. [3541]

Mrs. Liddell: Eurostat (the statistical office of the European Communities) has been publishing annual inflation rates based on the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP) since March 1997. The HICP has been designed expressly for comparisons of consumer price indices across all the European Union member states, although the Retail Prices Index (RPI) remains the best indicator of UK consumer price inflation. The Office for National Statistics has been closely involved in developing the specification of the HICP.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the methodology he will employ to determine his inflation target in future years; and if he will give details of each of the economic indicators he will be monitoring prior to making such a judgment. [3365]

Mrs. Liddell: The Chancellor set out his inflation target in the remit to the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee. A copy of the remit and background notes can be obtained from the House of Commons Library. In the Mansion House speech the Chancellor said that if the Government succeeded in strengthening the ability of the British economy to sustain growth with low inflation, and if international conditions permit, he would hope to lower the inflation target.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer at what intervals he intends to review the inflation target; and if he will make a statement. [3549]

Mrs. Liddell: The inflation target will be confirmed in each Budget. In his Mansion House speech the Chancellor said that if the Government succeeded in strengthening the ability of the UK economy to sustain growth with low inflation, and if international conditions permit, he would hope to lower the inflation target.

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the economic benefits derived from a long run inflation rate of $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. which a rate of inflation of $1\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. or less would not deliver. [4184]

Mrs. Liddell: Low inflation is an essential pre-condition for high and stable levels of growth and employment. The evidence suggests that higher inflation rates bring no long-run benefits, and are likely to involve long-term costs.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer further to his instruction to the Bank of England to pursue an inflation target of 2.5 per cent., in which stages of the economic cycle an inflation rate of 2.5 per cent. is compatible with *(a)* a rise and *(b)* a fall in unemployment. [4037]

Mrs. Liddell: The remit for the Monetary Policy Committee and background notes can be obtained from the House of Commons Library.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the rate of inflation at the time of each increase in interest rates in the last three years and the projected figures for inflation on each date for one year ahead. [3230]

Mrs. Liddell: The table lists the latest available inflation figures and latest published Treasury forecast for inflation for retail prices excluding mortgage interest payments (RPIX), at the time of each increase in interest rates over the last three years.

Date	Size of base rate increase (percentage point)	New base rate (percentage)	Latest published inflation rate (RPIX) (percentage)	One year ahead forecast Publication[1]	RPIX	Period
12 September 1994	¼	5.75	2.2 (July 1994)	SEF 94	2¾	95Q4
7 December 1994	¼	6.25	2.0 (October 1994)	FSBR 94	2½	95Q4
2 February 1995	½	6.75	2.5 (December 1994)	FSBR 94	2½	96Q2
30 February 1996	¼	6.00	2.9 (September 1994)	SEF 96	2¾	97Q4
6 May 1997	¼	6.25	2.7 (March 1997)	FSBR 96	2½	98Q2
6 June 1997	¼	6.50	2.5 (April 1997)	FSBR 96	2½	98Q2

[1] SEF denotes Summer Economic Forecast and FSBR denotes Financial Statement and Budget Report.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the correlation between the independence of the Central Bank and the rate of inflation in different countries over the last 15 years. [3234]

Mrs. Liddell: There have been numerous academic studies of the correlation between central bank independence and inflation, based on different groups of countries and assessed over different time periods.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what indicators he keeps under scrutiny in forming his estimates as to the future rate of inflation. [3248]

Mrs. Liddell: The Chancellor makes a comprehensive assessment of economic developments, taking account of all relevant indicators, in forming a view of inflation prospects. A full forecast for the economy will be published with the Budget on 2 July.

Debt Management

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) for what reasons he plans to transfer responsibility for debt management from the Bank of England to the Treasury; [3262]

(2) if he will list the advantages of having the Treasury manage the Government's debt; [3237]

(3) for what reasons he plans to transfer management of the Government's cash reserves from the Bank of England to the Treasury; [3265]

(4) if he will list the advantages of the Treasury managing the Government's cash reserves. [3241]

Mrs. Liddell: The decision to give the Bank of England operational responsibility for setting interest rates means that it is important to separate the Government's debt and cash management from the conduct of monetary policy to avoid conflicts of interest. The separation is intended to ensure that debt and cash management decisions continue to be taken in such a way as to minimise the cost of financing the Government's borrowing needs subject to risk and are not influenced by short-term monetary policy considerations (and *vice versa*).

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the Bank of England's performance in managing the Government's debt. [3239]

Mrs. Liddell: Ultimate policy responsibility for the Government's debt management has always rested with Treasury Ministers and policy is currently expressed in an annual gilts remit to the Bank. The Bank has offered valuable policy advice with regard to debt management and has conducted operations for the Government in the gilts market in an efficient and professional manner. The Bank has taken the lead in recent reforms to gilts market structure, notably gilt repo and preparations for gilt stripping, that have been widely praised by market participants.

Economic Indicators

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the quarterly level of *(a)* interest rates, *(b)* M3 and MO, *(c)* economic growth and *(d)* nominal exchange rate against (i) the Deutschmark, (ii) the Dollar and (iii) the real exchange rate for each quarter since 1987 together with the figures for inflation and growth in the quarter one year later. [3284]

Mrs. Liddell: The data are available from the following published sources:

Interest rates: Table 7.1O, *Financial Statistics* (code AMIH).

M4: Table 3.1D, *Financial Statistics* (code AUYN). N.B. The M3 broad money aggregate has not been published since 1989.

M0: Table 3.1C, *Financial Statistics* (code AVAE).

Deutschmark: Table 7.1A, *Financial Statistics* (code AJFH).

Dollar: Table 7.1A, *Financial Statistics* (code AJFA).

Real exchange rate: *OECD Main Economic Indicators*, page 30.

Output: Table 2.2, *Economic Trends* (code CADP).

Inflation: Table 3.1, *Economic Trends* (code CZBH).

Single Currency

Mrs. May: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the minimum time required by the Royal Mint to mint sufficient coins for the United Kingdom to be ready to introduce a European single currency. [3538]

Mrs. Liddell: The European Council in Madrid in December 1995 agreed that the introduction of euro banknotes and coins in any individual country should take place up to three years after it adopts the single currency, and up to almost four years after the decision on whether it meets the necessary conditions to participate. The Royal Mint has estimated that sufficient coins could be produced within this timescale.

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received from British industry on the desirability of the United Kingdom entering a European single currency. [3326]

Mrs. Liddell: My right hon. Friend has received a number of representations from British industry, on a wide range of subjects.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of progress toward meeting the criteria for the single currency on the ability of the Treasury to be millennium compliant; and if he will make a statement. [3139]

Mrs. Liddell: The Treasury has work in progress to identify and test its computer system to ensure that they will operate correctly at the turn of the century. This work is currently within the model timetable set down by CCTA.

The Government will seek to provide an economic environment built on the solid foundations of prudent economic management, sound finance and active employment measures to enhance job opportunities and employability. These policies are consistent with the Maastricht criteria of low inflation and sound public finances. Pursuing these policies has no impact on the ability of Treasury's computer systems to operate correctly at the turn of the century.

Regulation

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received regarding his proposed changes to City financial regulation from *(a)* legal organisations and *(b)* accountancy organisations; and if he will make a statement. [3684]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government are open to representations from everyone with an interest in financial regulation. Decisions have yet to be taken on the details of the arrangements that will be made under the enhanced Securities and Investments Board in relation to the bodies the hon. Gentleman refers to.

Gilt Market

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what facilities he has established in the Treasury for managing those Government operations in the gilt market which are being transferred from the Bank of England; [3250]

(2) how many staff will move from the Bank of England to the Treasury in connection with the transfer of responsibilities for managing the Government's operations in the gilt market. [3249]

Mrs. Liddell: Details of the transfer of debt management functions to the Treasury are currently being worked out with the Bank. Once identified, these proposals will be offered for consultation.

Securities and Investment Board

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost of establishing the enlarged Securities and Investment Board. [3421]

Mrs. Liddell: In his letter to Sir Andrew Large of 20 May, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor invited the Securities and Investments Board (SIB) to project manage the process of transition to the new arrangements set out in his statement of the same date. The cost of this work is a matter for SIB, and will be disclosed in their annual report in the usual way.

Demand Management

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his policy on managing demand in the economy. [3328]

Mrs. Liddell: Monetary and fiscal policies will be set to deliver lasting macroeconomic stability. This is a precondition for high and stable levels of growth and employment.

Public Finances

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 3 June, *Official Report*, column *147*, if he will define numerically what constitutes sound public finances for the financial years *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [3334]

Mr. Darling: The Government's fiscal policy will be spelt out in the Budget, along with forecasts and projections for government borrowing.

"European Community Finances"

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to publish the 1997 edition of "European Community Finances". [3336]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) on 10 June, *Official Report*, column *394*.

National Debt

Mrs. May: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the consequences of his recent announcement that Her Majesty's Treasury will be responsible for the management of the national debt will be for the Registrar's Department at the Bank of England. [3536]

Mrs. Liddell: Details of the transfer of debt management functions to the Treasury are currently being worked out with the Bank. Once identified, these proposals will be offered for consultation.

Public Sector Borrowing Requirement

Mr. Norman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his targets for the PSBR as a percentage of gross domestic product. [3706]

Mr. Darling: Forecasts and projections for the PSBR will be set out in the Budget and accompanying statement on 2 July, which will also spell out the Government's fiscal policy.

Inflation and Growth

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what instructions he has given the Governor of the Bank of England about the balance between his inflation target and prospects for growth. [3323]

Mrs. Liddell: The Chancellor wrote to the Governor of the Bank of England setting out the remit for the Bank's

Monetary Policy Committee on June 12. A copy of the remit can be obtained from the House of Commons Library. The Chancellor set out his approach to monetary policy in more detail in his Mansion House speech on June 12.

Ministerial Advice

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he or any of his ministerial team are receiving advice from persons working in the Treasury or with access to any official papers, but who are not being paid for their services from public funds. [3361]

Mrs. Liddell: Yes. Ministers may receive advice from a variety of people who are not being paid for their services from public funds.

Building Society Assets

Mr. Todd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if we will review controls on the distribution of building society assets in circumstances of conversion or merger to protect *(a)* women who are normally second names in joint accounts and *(b)* those with learning difficulties who must have an authorised signatory who may be a signatory on behalf of several account holders but may claim only one payment on their behalf. [3740]

Mrs. Liddell: I have no plans to do so. Both areas were addressed by Private Members' Acts in the last Parliament: *(a)* by the Building Societies (Joint Account Holders) Act 1995 and *(b)* by the Building Societies (Distributions) Act 1997.

Economic Model

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish details of each of the mathematical, economic and other quantitative assumptions which are being used by his Department in running its economic model of the economy. [3363]

Mrs. Liddell: The Treasury model and associated documentation is available through the Library of the House.

Special Advisers

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the qualifications of each of the special advisers in the Treasury and on how those qualifications are relevant to their work inside that Department. [3681]

Mrs. Liddell: All Special Advisers are appointed to advise Ministers on the development of Government policy and its effective presentation. My right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, made his appointments against these criteria.

Knight Williams

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will review the circumstances of the Knight Williams investors; and if he will make a statement. [3422]

Mrs. Liddell: Knight Williams and Co. has been declared in default by the Investors Compensation Scheme and claims by investors are being considered. Regrettably, progress has been slowed by a number of factors but there is no need for a review.

Economic Activity

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the economic indicators which he will use as the lead indicators of changes in economic activity. [3373]

Mrs. Liddell: I will make a comprehensive assessment of the current state of the economy, taking account of all relevant indicators in forming my view of the prospects for economic activity.

EC Budget

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the United Kingdom contribution to, and public sector receipts from, the EC budget for *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999 in pound sterling. [3337]

Mrs. Liddell: The latest estimates of the United Kingdom's net contribution to the European Community Budget are those set out in the Departmental Report published by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer in March this year (Cm. 3617). These cover the financial years 1997–98 to 1999–2000 and are as follows:

1997–98: £2,750 million

1998–99: £3,000 million

1999–2000: £3,400 million

These estimates were produced under the revised methodology announced in the 1996 Financial Statement and Budget Report and explained further in the Departmental Report. They estimate the trend in the UK's net contribution over the period in question, incorporating the UK's gross contribution, abatement and public sector receipts, and do not identify the individual elements which the right hon. Member has requested. An estimate of the UK's gross contribution to, and receipts from, the 1997 EC Budget will be included in the annual White paper on the EC Budget which the Government will publish before the recess.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what were the *(a)* contributions to, and *(b)* total public sector receipts from, the EC budget for each member state for each year from 1993 to 1996 in pound sterling. [3338]

Mrs. Liddell: The tables set out the information requested for the years 1993 to 1995. These figures are derived from ecu figures contained in annual reports of the European Court of Auditors and have been converted

to sterling using the annual average exchange rates shown. Information on 1996 will not be available until the Court of Auditors publish their report on the 1996 Community Budget later this year.

Gross contributions by member states 1993 to 1995

£ million

	1993	*1994*	*1995*
Belgium	1,864	2,184	2,195
Denmark	939	1,003	1,061
Germany	14,851	16,532	17,463
Greece	787	768	807
Spain	4,027	3,651	2,985
France	8,988	9,711	9,726
Ireland	442	494	544
Italy	7,991	6,004	5,252
Luxembourg	130	128	137
Netherlands	3,138	3,285	3,562
Austria	n/a	n/a	1,444
Portugal	708	941	708
Finland	n/a	n/a	727
Sweden	n/a	n/a	1,358
UK	5,937	4,965	7,576

Source:
Court of Auditors Reports, converted to sterling using £=1.2845 (1993), £=1.2924 (1994) and £=1.2211 (1995).
It should be noted that the European Community Budget is denominated in ECU but that the figures in this table have been converted to sterling using the annual average exchange rate for each of the years. These figures should, therefore, be treated with caution.
Notes:
1. Figures for gross contributions are after account is taken of the UK's abatement and the bringing to account of surpluses and deficits in respect of Member States contributions in earlier years.
2. These figures exclude 10 per cent. collection costs in respect of contributions for sugar and agricultural levies and customs duties—Member States deduct this from their contributions for levies and duties before making their contributions available to the Community.
3. The revenue available to the Community also includes relatively small amounts of miscellaneous revenue derived from such sources as the sale of publications, disposal of property etc.

Receipts paid to Member States 1993–95

£ million

	Belgium	*Denmark*	*Germany*	*Greece*	*Spain*	*France*	*Ireland*	*Italy*	*Luxembg.*	*Nethrland.*	*Austria*	*Portugal*	*Finland*	*Sweden*	*UK*
1993	1,911	1,233	5,641	4,008	6,433	8,195	2,288	6,804	278	2,105	n/a	2,661	n/a	n/a	3,504
1994	1,944	1,157	5,981	3,748	6,062	7,679	1,850	4,038	324	1,869	n/a	2,354	n/a	n/a	4,069
1995	1,940	1,311	6,464	3,664	8,896	8,312	2,090	4,749	101	1,920	702	2,658	592	590	3,711

Source:
Court of Auditors Reports, converted to sterling using £=1.2845 (1993), £=1.2924 (1994) and £=1.2211 (1995).
It should be noted that the European Community Budget is denominated in ECU but that the figures in this table have been converted to sterling using the annual average exchange rate for each of the years. These figures should, therefore treated with caution.
Notes:
Due to a change in the basis of the Court of Auditors report figures, administration payments to Member States, including other institutions, are not included in the amounts shown for 1995. This mainly effects Belgium and Luxembourg.

Euro

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what would be the estimated number of euro coins that would need to be minted if the United Kingdom adopted the euro; and what would be the estimated cost. [4048]

Mrs. Liddell: It is estimated that 18 billion euro coins would be needed if the United Kingdom were to adopt the euro. The costs if the UK were to join would depend on the detailed coin specifications.

Unemployment (Greenock and Inverclyde)

Dr. Godman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will list by each year of age, the number of *(a)* male and *(b)* female 18 to 24-year-olds currently unemployed in (i) the parliamentary constituency of Greenock and Inverclyde and (ii) the Greenock travel-to-work area; [3461]

(2) how many *(a)* males and *(b)* females have been unemployed in (i) the parliamentary constituency of Greenock and Inverclyde and (ii) the Greenock travel-to-work area for more than (1) six months, (2) 12 months, (3) 18 months and (4) 24 months. [3463]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Dr. Norman Godman, dated 18 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent questions (3461, and 3463) on unemployment in the Greenock and Inverclyde parliamentary constituency and the Greenock travel-to-work area.

The measure of unemployment, derived from the quarterly Labour Force Survey, is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and counts as unemployed people who are: a) without a paid job; b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained. However, the LFS cannot provide estimates of unemployment for local areas.

ONS also publishes the monthly claimant count, which is based on the administrative system and includes all people claiming unemployment-related benefits (i.e. Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support or National Insurance credits) at Employment Service offices on the day of the monthly count, who on that day had signed on as unemployed and available to do any suitable work. Essentially, all people who attend an Employment Service office to sign are counted, irrespective of whether they are actually receiving benefit.

The information requested can only be derived from the claimant count, accessible from the Nomis database at the House of Commons Library.

Dr. Godman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* males and *(b)* females aged 18 to 24 years are currently unemployed in (i) the parliamentary constituency of Greenock and Inverclyde and (ii) the

Greenock travel-to-work area; and what percentages of the national total for those of this age group in each case these figures represent. [3464]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* The Information falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Dr. Norman Godman, dated 18 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question (3464) on unemployment in the Greenock and Inverclyde parliamentary constituency and the Greenock travel-to-work area.

The measure of unemployment, derived from the quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS), is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and counts as unemployed people who are: a) without a paid job; b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained. However, the LFS cannot provide estimates of unemployment for local areas.

ONS also publishes the monthly claimant count, which is based on the administrative system and includes all people claiming unemployment-related benefits (i.e. Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support or National Insurance credits) at Employment Service offices on the day of the monthly count, who on that day had signed on as unemployed and available to do any suitable work. Essentially, all people who attend an Employment Service office to sign are counted, irrespective of whether they are actually receiving benefit.

The information you have requested can only be derived from the claimant count and is given in the attached table.

Unadjusted claimant unemployment aged 18–24 years as a percentage of the total unemployed in this age group in April 1997 (most recently available date)

	Males		*Females*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Parliamentary constituency				
Greenock and Inverclyde	394	0.13	121	0.10
Travel-to-work area				
Greenock	587	0.20	175	0.14

Low Pay

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in Lancaster and Wyre constituency were paid at rates below: *(a)* £4, *(b)* £3.50 and *(c)* £3 per hour, at the latest date for which figures are available. [4054]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* The Information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Hilton Dawson, dated 18 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on earnings in Lancaster and Wyre parliamentary constituency.

The latest information, from the New Earnings Survey April 1996, which preceded the creation of the Lancaster and Wyre parliamentary constituency, is given in the table below. Data for the area prior to the last General Election are given instead.

Employees on adult rates whose pay for the survey pay-period was not affected by absence, new earnings survey April 1996

Percentage of employees with hourly earnings (excluding overtime) less than:

	£3.00	*£3.50*	*£4.00*
Lancaster			
Full-time	0.0	2.0	5.4
Part-time	9.1	23.6	36.4
All	2.5	7.9	13.9
Wyre			
Full-time	3.8	13.8	20.0
Part-time	16.2	29.7	43.2
All	7.7	18.8	27.4

Unemployment

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the relative rates of unemployment in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* France, *(c)* Germany, *(d)* Italy and *(e)* Spain. [3426]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Andrew Lansley, dated 18 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on the relative rates of unemployment in (a) the United Kingdom, (b) France, (c) Germany, (d) Italy and (e) Spain.

The measure of unemployment, derived from the quarterly Labour Force Survey, is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and counts as unemployed people who are: a) without a paid job; b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained.

The latest available ILO unemployment rates published by the Statistical Office of the European Community (SOEC), for March 1997, were 7.3% for the UK, 12.5% for France, 9.7% for Germany, 12.2% for Italy (for January 1997) and 21.4% for Spain.

Earnings (Burnley)

Mr. Pike: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimates he has made of the number of people in Burnley earning less than *(a)* £3.50 per hour and *(b)* £4.50 per hour. [2889]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Peter Pike, dated 18 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on earnings in Burnley.

The latest information, from the New Earnings Survey (NES) April 1996, is given in the table below:

Employees on adult rates whose pay for the survey pay-period was not affected by absence, NES April 1996

	Percentage of employees with hourly earnings (excluding overtime) less than:	
	£3.50	*£4.50*
Burnley	8.1	20.4

Balance of Payments

Mrs. May: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the balance of payments statistics for the United Kingdom will continue to be collected via a survey. [3535]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mrs. Theresa May, dated 18 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on whether the balance of payments for the United Kingdom will continue to be collected via a survey.

The United Kingdom balance of payments are compiled from a number of different sources including administrative sources and a variety of surveys conducted by the Office for National Statistics and the Bank of England. There are no plans to move away from the use of surveys as a source of data for the United Kingdom balance of payments.

Local Government Finance

Mrs. May: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans the Government have to review the timetable for setting levels of standard spending assessment and revenue support grant for local authorities. [3537]

Mr. Raynsford: I have been asked to reply.

The Government currently have no plans to review the timetable for setting levels of standard spending assessment and revenue support grant for local authorities.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 19 June 1997

PRIME MINISTER

Security Clearance

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Prime Minister what are the arrangements for hearing appeals from those who need to have access to protectively marked Government assets and have been refused security clearance or have had that clearance withdrawn. [4979]

The Prime Minister: An independent Security Vetting Appeals Panel, chaired by Sir Anthony May, will be established on 1 July to hear appeals against refusal or withdrawal of clearance at Security Check (SC) or Developed Vetting (DV) levels and to advise the head of the organisation concerned. The Panel will be available to all those, other than recruits, in the public and private sectors and in the Armed Forces who are subject to security vetting at these levels, have exhausted existing appeals mechanisms within their own organisations and remain dissatisfied with the result. Separate arrangements are available to staff of the security and intelligence agencies. The establishment of the Panel therefore brings to an end the role of the Three Advisers who, since 1948, have been available to consider cases where security clearance was refused or withdrawn on the grounds of subversion.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration Detention Centres

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many people were detained in purpose-built immigration detention centres in each month in the last year; [3985]

(2) how many places in purpose-built immigration detention centres are currently occupied; [3983]

(3) what is the total current capacity of purpose-built immigration detention centres. [3984]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table.

Persons detained in purpose-built immigration detention centres and their current capacity

	Heathrow Queen's Building	*Harmondsworth*	*Manchester Airport*	*Campsfield House*	*Tinsley House*	*Gatwick Meadvale*[1]	*Stanstead*[2]
Number of persons detained on:							
31 May 1996	13	91	12	196	39	36	7
30 June 1996	14	91	7	198	92	43	7
31 July 1996	13	85	8	193	100	41	7
31 August 1996	15	91	10	195	120	42	—
30 September 1996	14	88	16	197	144	44	—
31 October 1996	13	87	13	195	136	45	—
30 November 1996	14	89	13	189	139	45	—
31 December 1996	15	90	4	194	132	44	—
31 January 1997	15	90	11	195	134	42	—
28 February 1997	14	85	6	195	139	39	—
31 March 1997	14	88	12	195	142	44	—
30 April 1997	15	88	7	197	145	32	—
31 May 1997	15	91	5	195	144	—	—
Current detention capacity	15	93	16	198	150	—	—

[1] Closed on 7 August 1996.
[2] Closed on 19 May 1997.

Asylum Seekers

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers currently in detention have alleged that they are under 18 years of age; and where they are being held. [3940]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I regret that the information requested is not available. The available information on detained asylum seekers shows that none is recorded as being under the age of 18.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers are currently detained in *(a)* prisons and *(b)* detention centres solely under the powers of the Immigration Act 1971. [3938]

Mr. O'Brien: As at 31 May 1997, the most recent date for which information is available, 279 persons in Prison Service establishments and 374 persons in detention centres, who had sought asylum at some stage, were recorded as being solely detained under Immigration Act powers.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of state for the Home Department how many asylum seekers are currently being detained in Category B Her Majesty's prisons without being charged with a criminal offence. [3986]

Mr. O'Brien: As at 31 May 1997, a total of 279 persons, who had sought asylum at some stage, were recorded as detained solely under Immigration Act powers in Her Majesty's prisons. Of these, 204 were held in establishments capable of holding Category B prisoners.

Road Accidents

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to bring forward primary legislation to make failure to stop after a road accident involving personal injury an arrestable offence. [4001]

Mr. Michael: The Government's intention is to legislate as soon as practicable, when a suitable opportunity arises in the legislative programme.

Illegal Entrants

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people are currently being detained in Her Majesty's Prisons under the Forgery and Counterfeiting Act 1986, having entered the United Kingdom with false documents; how many of those have entered the United Kingdom as transit passengers on their way to a third country; and how many have applied for asylum in the United Kingdom. [3982]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I regret that the information requested is not held centrally.

Alcopops

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what regulations he plans to introduce governing the production and sale of alcopops drinks. [3952]

Mr. George Howarth: The Government are very concerned about the promotion and sale of certain alcoholic drinks to children, and I am holding urgent talks with the drinks industry. I am also chairing a Ministerial Group to examine options for Government action. We shall not hesitate to act if the industry response is unsatisfactory.

Prisoners (Education)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of the Prison Service budget is allocated to educational activities for prisoners in the current financial year; and what were the equivalent figures for *(a)* 1982, *(b)* 1987 and *(c)* 1992. [4176]

Ms Joyce Quin: There is no central education budget: decisions on the size of education budgets are taken by individual prison governors. The table below shows the proportion of the Prison Service's current expenditure spent on contracted-in education, library services and educational materials at directly run prisons for the years 1982–83, 1987–88, 1992–93 and (provisionally) 1996–97. The figures for 1996–97 may not be on precisely the same basis as those for earlier years due to changes in accounting arrangements.

1982–83: 2.14 per cent.

1987–88: 2.54 per cent.

1992–93: 2.74 per cent.

1996–97: 2.48 per cent.

Public Houses

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review the enforcement of the law in respect of absentee landlords of public houses. [4079]

Mr. George Howarth: I am not aware of any particular problems in this area of the law. If the hon. Member has specific concerns, I should be happy to look into them.

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will establish a national database of *(a)* pub licensees and *(b)* persons who are barred from becoming pub licensees. [4077]

Mr. Howarth: I see no need to do so. Liquor licence applicants have to make a statutory declaration that they are not ineligible, and the licensing courts and police make appropriate enquiries about every applicant.

Psychologists (Prisons)

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the complement of psychologists at *(a)* Camphill, *(b)* Albany and *(c)* Parkhurst prisons; how many vacancies there are for these posts; how long the posts concerned have been vacant; and what plans he has to change the complements. [4081]

Ms Joyce Quin: Details of the complements of psychologists at Camp Hill, Albany and Parkhurst prisons and any vacancies are shown in the attached table.

There are no plans to change the complements at Albany and Camp Hill. It is planned to change the Parkhurst complement on 1 July by removing the psychologist post and adding another psychological assistant. The other posts will remain unchanged.

Psychologist complements at Isle of Wight prisons

	Complement	*Vacancies (effective from)*
Camp Hill	—	—
		(+1 Senior Psychologist)
Albany	1 Principal Psychologist	—
	1 Senior Psychologist	—
	1 Psychologist	1 Psychologist (1 May 1997)
	3 Psychological Assistants	1 Psychological Assistant (1 May 1997)
Parkhurst	1 Principal Psychologist	—
	1 Higher Psychologist	—
	1 Psychologist	—
	½ Psychological Assistant	—

Hare Coursing

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will assess the advantages of outlawing hare coursing. [4021]

Mr. George Howarth: The Government are committed to allowing a free vote on whether there should be a ban on hunting with hounds. A Private Member's Bill to ban hunting with dogs is now before the House.

Closed Circuit Television

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to fund CCTV in 1997–98; [4277]

(2) when new bids for CCTV will be considered. [4279]

Mr. Michael: Round three of the closed circuit television (CCTV) Challenge Competition provided £15 million for CCTV in the current financial year (1997–98). This money has already been allocated. A decision on 1998–99 will be made later in the summer.

Special Advisers

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will indicate the number of salaries of his Department's special advisers falling within the range of *(a)* £24,349–£29,999, *(b)* £30,000–34,999, *(c)* £35,000–£39,999, *(d)* £40,000–£44,999, *(e)* £45,000–£49,999, *(f)* £50,000–£54,999, *(g)* £55,000–£59,999, *(h)* £60,000–£64,999, *(i)* £65,000–69,999 and *(j)* £70,000–£73,484. [4555]

Mr. Straw: Consistent with the practice of previous administrations and to protect the privacy of individuals, only aggregate information on the salaries of special advisers will be published.

Once all salaries have been agreed, the number of advisers paid in each of the appropriate £10,000 bands will be published.

Prison Service (Private Sector Involvement)

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what conclusions he has reached about future private sector involvement in the Prison Service. [5060]

Mr. Straw: The Government have expressed reservations about the principle of contracting out the management of prisons. It is generally accepted that responsibility for the incarceration of offenders must remain with the state. The issue is whether that responsibility should, as a matter of principle, be discharged through direct management in the public sector or whether it can properly and effectively be discharged under a regulatory framework. This was addressed in the recent report on prison management by the Home Affairs Select Committee; and the Government now wish to give further and careful consideration to the arguments deployed in that report before settling their overall approach to this issue.

Existing management contracts will be honoured, as I have already made clear. But we are considering ways in which the current regulatory framework might be strengthened. At present, all disciplinary hearings in contractually managed prisons are conducted by a state official—the Controller, a Prison Service governor, who also monitors the performance of the contractor on behalf of the responsible Prison Service Area Manager. This is an important principle from which we will not depart; and we are currently reviewing the scope for extending the Controller's powers in respect of prisoners' requests and complaints, sentence calculation, scrutiny of security classifications and frequency of security audits.

On the letting of new contracts and the renewal of existing contracts, our immediate approach is necessarily determined by current expenditure plans, to which we are committed, and by operational requirements.

We have inherited a prison population rising sharply, (well above projections) with expenditure provision for new prisons limited to establishments to be designed, constructed, managed and financed by the private sector. Even with the new prison ship, Her Majesty's Prison Weare, there is huge pressure on capacity. We have therefore decided to proceed with existing procurement plans to provide additional new places on this basis by 1999–2000. This is an urgent operational requirement to overcome projected shortfalls in accommodation and to avoid dangerous levels of overcrowding and the use of police cells. We will shortly be launching competitions to provide an 800 place Category B local prison at Agecroft, Salford, and a 400 place Young Offender Institution at Pucklechurch, near Bristol.

I have also authorised the renewal of the contract for the operation of Her Majesty's Prison Blakenhurst with the private sector operator, United Kingdom Detention Services. The existing contract expires on 25 May 1998; and we are required to give the operator one year's notice of a decision to renew the contract. The prison has been performing well against the current contract requirements and in comparison with comparable prisons in the public sector; and I am satisfied that the terms that have been negotiated for renewal of the contract offer value for money. The establishment could not be returned to public sector control without incurring additional expenditure, which would require offsetting savings elsewhere; and in the light of the current budgetary pressures on the Prison Service and pending our consideration of the Select Committee report, I am persuaded that no other course of action could be justified in current circumstances. However, in order to ensure that future options are kept as open as possible while our overall policy is under review, I have decided to renew the contract for 3 years only, the minimum practical—and contractually permissible—period.

Moreover, before further decisions are made on prison procurement beyond the extra places within existing plans or on the renewal of any other existing contracts, I have asked the Prison Service to:

(a) explore all possible methods of using private finance on terms which offer value for money including design, build and maintain new prisons with the public sector providing custodial services; and

(b) seek to demonstrate that the public sector Prison Service has the capacity to match the performance of the private sector in comparable prisons, and that realistic plans can be developed to establish a case for returning contractually managed prisons to the public sector on value for money grounds when consideration is given to the issue on the expiry of contracts. I have asked senior Prison Service managers to engage in consultations with the Prison Service unions to this end.

Proposals for private sector area involvement in other areas of the Prison Service, which do not raise the same issues of principle, will be treated on their merits. I have authorised the extension of the contract with Group 4 to operate the court escort and custody service in Area 7. This is essentially a specialist service, distinguishable from the management of prisons; and I am satisfied both with the quality of the service being provided and with the terms negotiated for extension of the contract.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Cricket Test Matches

Ms Gisela Stuart: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what is his policy on the televising of cricket test matches on terrestrial television channels. [3980]

Mr. Fisher: Test matches involving England are among the events listed under the Broadcasting Act 1996. Rights for live television coverage of these events must be made available to broadcasters offering a generally available free to air service: currently the BBC and Channels 3 and 4. The provisions do not apply retrospectively, and consequently only contracts agreed after the Act came into force are affected. I announced in the House on 19 May that the Government was initiating a review of this list of events and the work is under way in my Department. The review will include a consultation with all interested parties.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time persons employed by his Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3 an hour. [4200]

Mr. Tom Clarke: No full-time or part-time member of staff in the Department of National Heritage is paid less than £4 an hour.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Child Deaths

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate she has made of the number of *(a)* people and *(b)* children under five dying each day in the developing world from (i) inadequate sanitation, (ii) lack of clean water, (iii) starvation and (iv) war. [3806]

Clare Short: DFID makes no such global estimates. However, I have approached the United Nations, who collect some of this data on a country by country basis, and will write to my hon. Friend when I have their response.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Minimum Wage

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the precise criteria which the Low Pay Commission will apply in making their recommendation on the optimum level of statutory minimum pay. [4053]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The independent Low Pay Commission will recommend to Government the level at which the National Minimum Wage might be introduced having undertaken a wide-ranging consultation with employers, including small businesses, employees, the general public and other interested parties and taking into account relevant economic circumstances prevailing at the time.

Small Businesses

Mr. Cotter: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to reduce the regulatory burden on small businesses. [3956]

Mrs. Roche: As we made clear in our manifesto, we are committed to relieving the regulatory burdens on small businesses. To achieve this, we plan to work in partnership with small firms to ensure that new regulations are simple and fair. We also want to ensure that regulations are enforced fairly. As part of this process we will maintain close links with small firms and their representative bodies to identify their key concerns. We will also reconstitute the Deregulation Task Force to increase its focus on small firms by increasing small business representation.

Newsagents

Ms Walley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she last met representatives from the Multiple Newsagents Association; what subjects were discussed; and if he will make a statement. [4175]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: Neither my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade nor I have yet met the Multiple Newsagents Association since arriving at the Department.

Astra Holdings

Mr. Cousins: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will review the legal action against some of the former directors of Astra Holdings commenced under the previous administration. [2923]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: No information has been drawn to my attention which suggests that I should review the disqualification proceedings instituted against some of the former directors of Astra Holdings plc. A trial has now been fixed and it must be for the Court to determine the issues.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Government Car Service

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what targets he has set for fuel consumption by

the Government Car Service; if meeting such targets will involve the use of diesel vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [4056]

Mr. Kilfoyle: For 1997–98, the Government Car and Despatch Agency has been set the target of achieving an annual average of 25.5 miles per gallon for the Government Car Service and Inter Despatch Service fleets. Responsibility for meeting this target has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Agency, and I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. Nick Matheson, to write to the hon. Member about Agency's use of diesel fuelled vehicles.

Letter from Nick Matheson to Mr. Tim Boswell, dated 17 June 1997:

I have been asked by Mr Peter Kilfoyle MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (who has ministerial responsibility for the Government Car Service (GCS)), to provide a response to that part of your Parliamentary Question on fuel consumption targets for the GCS that relates to the use of diesel engined vehicles. I am the Chief Executive of the Government Car and Despatch Agency with operational responsibility for the GCS.

The Agency fleet comprises 179 cars operated by the Government Car Service, all of which are petrol driven, and 63 diesel powered vans operated by the Interdespatch Service (IDS). The overall Agency fuel consumption target of 25.5 mpg includes both types of vehicle.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Burma

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Goverment's trade promotion policy towards Burma. [4898]

Mr. Fatchett: We will not provide any financial support to companies for trade missions to Burma or for trade promotion activities within Burma until there is progress towards democratic reform and respect for human rights in Burma. Officials in the UK and at the British Embassy in Rangoon will continue to provide British companies with routine advice about doing business in Burma. Wherever possible such advice will make clear the present realities in Burma, including the political and human rights situation and the state of the economy. It will also draw to businessmen's attention statements by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other pro-democracy leaders discouraging trade and investment in Burma. We shall encourage our EU partners to take similar action.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will make a statement on international efforts to restore democracy in Sierra Leone; [4159]

(2) if he will make a statement on the implications of his Department's mission statement for relations with Sierra Leone following the recent coup d'état; [4158]

(3) if he will make a statement on the actions of the Nigerian military in Sierra Leone; [4229]

(4) how Her Majesty's Government are assisting efforts to find a negotiated and peaceful settlement to the crisis in Sierra Leone; [4154]

(5) if he will make a statement on his recent discussions on Sierra Leone with the United Nations Secretary General; [4155]

(6) if he will make a statement about Nigeria's military intervention in Sierra Leone; [4156]

(7) what assessment his Department has made of the regional implications of the crisis in Sierra Leone. [4157]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) on 12 June, *Official Report*, column *545*. We deplore this coup and shall continue to work for the restoration of the legitimate government in Sierra Leone without further bloodshed. Those who led the coup have no support from their own people or from the international community. International stability and respect for human rights are core parts of the FCO mission statement. They have an evident relevance to the situation in Sierra Leone.

Several West African states, including Ghana, Nigeria and Guinea, are working together to find a peaceful settlement to the current crisis in Sierra Leone. We strongly support their efforts, which are likely to include an early high-level regional meeting to identify a way forward. I discussed the situation in Sierra Leone with the Ghanaian Deputy Foreign Minister on 18 June. I am also in touch with the Sierra Leone High Commissioner in London. We are active within both the UN and the Commonwealth about their respective roles in the search for a negotiated settlement in Sierra Leone. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs met Mr. Annan, United Nations Secretary General, on 4 June. They discussed Sierra Leone and expressed the strong hope that a negotiated settlement would be found. With partners in the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) we will consider Sierra Leone at the next CMAG meeting on 10–11 July. I discussed the prospects for this meeting with the Commonwealth Secretary on 19 June. CMAG will report to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Edinburgh in October.

Nigeria has long maintained a military presence of around 1,000 troops in Sierra Leone under bilateral and multilateral agreements. Twenty-four Nigerians died defending President Kabbah. Extra deployments after the coup followed appeals to regional states by President Kabbah and by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to assist in restoring constitutional order. We encourage Nigeria now to play a constructive role in the regional efforts to secure a negotiated settlement.

We are concerned that the coup in Sierra Leone should not have a destabilising influence elsewhere in the region. In particular we are watching events in neighbouring Liberia where democratic elections are due on 19 July. The universal condemnation of the coup by African states offers some reassurance that the region itself is determined not to allow the instability in Sierra Leone to spread.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Early Years Development Plans

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in what circumstances he will be willing to approve interim local authority early years development plans which specify that there should be only one point of entry for four-year-olds each year at the beginning of the Autumn Term. [3564]

Mr. Byers: Interim early years development plans will be approved only if they demonstrate how a good quality early education place can be secured for each eligible four-year-old for the three terms before compulsory school age.

Engineering (Students)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will take steps to encourage more young people to study engineering. [3567]

Dr. Howells: The National Curriculum makes the study of science, mathematics and technology compulsory for all pupils between the ages of 5 and 16, and this provides a suitable grounding for young people to move on to the study of engineering.

More specifically, the Government is working in partnership with the industry itself to promote career prospects in engineering. We are currently involved with a wide range of engineering bodies, institutions, and major UK companies in the Year of Engineering Success campaign. This is intended to demonstrate the vital role played by engineering in the economy and in daily life and to encourage young people to consider engineering as a career.

University for Industry

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Government's proposals for a university for industry. [3566]

Dr. Howells: The Government will establish the University for Industry which will open up new opportunities for adults to improve their skills and realise their potential. By harnessing new technology the University for Industry will help improve the quality and accessibility of learning opportunities and will aim in particular to be of help to small businesses. It will enable greater participation in, and demand for, learning and modernise its supply. It will bring learning to the workplace, the home and the community.

We are taking urgent steps to bring together a range of interests from across and outside Government to agree the way ahead on the University for Industry's development. An announcement is expected soon.

Welfare to Work

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will take into account when framing the welfare to work proposals the position of people who are not in their preferred employment but do not qualify as being unemployed for six months because they take on a series of temporary agency jobs. [3950]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We are currently considering the detailed design of our New Deal programmes for young people out of work for six months or more. Our key priority is to help people who have experienced a continuous period out of work. We will however take other disadvantaged groups into account in designing the initiative, as far as resources and practicalities allow.

Further Education

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will create a standard unit of resource for all 16 to 19-year-old students financed from the public purse irrespective of whether they attend local education authority or grant-maintained schools, sixth form colleges or further education colleges. [4163]

Dr. Howells: I currently have no plans to create such a unit of resource. In March this year the Department published a report comparing the costs of education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds. I will be looking further at these findings and consulting with our partners in the education service before making any proposals about future funding mechanisms for 16 to 19 education.

Mrs. Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will readjust the cash base-line for further education to take account of the increased number of students in the further education sector. [4162]

Dr. Howells: I refer the right hon. Member to my answer to her of 10 June, *Official Report*, column *369*.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will introduce measures to stop the loss of teaching staff in post-16 further education. [4202]

Dr. Howells: From incorporation on 1 April 1993, further education colleges assumed responsibility for their own finance and organisation, including the appointment, dismissal, redundancy and conditions of service generally of their staff. Decisions on recruitment and retention are, therefore, for individual colleges to make.

Schools Capital Spending (Kent)

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with Kent county council following the council's decision to freeze capital spending on schools. [4136]

Mr. Byers: My right hon. Friend has had no such discussions. We understand that Kent County Council has placed a temporary moratorium on all capital expenditure. We are concerned at this development and will be asking Kent County Council for a full explanation for its decision.

Admission and Transfer Ages

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the applications received in each of the last five years from local education authorities or from grant-maintained schools for changes in the ages of admission or transfer, indicating in each case the changes proposed; and if he will make a statement. [4164]

Ms Estelle Morris: The applications received in each of the last five years from local education authorities and grant-maintained schools for changes in the ages of admissions or transfer are listed below. All proposals will be considered on their individual merits.

Local education authorities	*Proposal*
1992	
Surrey	to move from a middle-school system to a system of primary and secondary schools with transfer at age 11
Avon	to change the age range of some primary schools
1993	
Doncaster	to move from a middle-school system to a system of primary and secondary schools with transfer at age 11
Hampshire	to move from a middle-school to a system of primary and secondary schools with transfer at age 11
Wakefield	to move from a middle-school system to a system of primary and secondary schools with transfer at age 11
Kent	to move from a middle-school system to a system of primary and secondary schools with transfer at age 11 in the Longfield area
1994	
Leeds	to change the age range of some primary schools
Doncaster	to move form a middle-school system to a system of primary and secondary schools with transfer at age 11
Berkshire	to change the age of transfer between primary and middle schools and reduce the age of admission to secondary schools in the Slough area
Warwickshire	to move from a middle-school system to a system of primary and secondary schools with transfer at age 11
Devon	to change the age range of some primary schools
Kent	to change the age range of some primary schools
1995	
Birmingham	to move from a middle-school system to a system of primary and secondary schools with transfer at age 11
1996	
Buckinghamshire	to change the age of transfer between primary, middle and secondary schools to change the age range of Loughton County Combined School from 5–12 to 8–12
1997	
Berkshire	to change the age-range of middle schools in the Slough area

Grant maintained schools

LEA area	*School*	*Nature of change*
1992		
Ealing	Brentside High School	12-19 to 11-19
	Drayton Manor High School	12-19 to 11-19
	Greenford High School	12-19 to 11-19
	Northholt High School	12-19 to 11-19
	Wood End Middle School	8-12 to 7-12
Hampshire	Hardley School	12-16 to 11-16
	Portsmouth Boys' School	12-16 to 11-16
Kent	Oakwood Park Grammar School	13-18 to 11-18
Kirklees	Castle Hall School	9-13 to 11-16
Surrey	Collingwood School	12-18 to 11-18
	De Stafford School	12-18 to 11-18
	Epsom and Ewell High School	12-18 to 11-18
	Glyn School	12-18 to 11-18
	Guildford County School	12-18 to 11-18
	Roseberry School	12-18 to 11-18
	The Beacon Secondary School	12-18 to 11-18
Warwickshire	Ash Green Secendary School	12-16 to 11-16
1993		
Hampshire	Abbotswood Middle School	8-12 to 7-11
	Calmore Middle School	8-12 to 7-11
	Front Lawn Middle School	8-12 to 7-11
	Purbrook Park School	12-16 to 11-16
	Testwood School	
Surrey	Yattendon Middle School	8-12 to 7-11
Warwickshire	Avon Valley School	12-16 to 11-16
	Queen Elizabeth School	12-18 to 11-18
1994		
Berkshire	Herschel GM Grammar School	12-18 to 11-18
	Langley GM Grammar School	12-18 to 11-18
	Slough GM Grammar School	12-18 to 11-18
Buckinghamshire	Beaconsfield High School	12-18 to 11-18
Hampshire	Lyndhurst Middle Primary School	8-12 to 7-11
Surrey	Heathside GM Secondary School	12-16 to 11-16
Warwickshire	Hartshill School	12-16 to 11-16
	Myton School	12-16 to 11-16
	Rugby High School	12-18 to 11-18
1995		
Berkshire	Cippenham GM Middle School	8-12 to 7-12
	The Westgate School	12-16 to 11-16
Lincolnshire	King Edward VI School	14-18 to 11-18
Merton	Ursuline Convent School	13-18 to 11-18
Warwickshire	Middlemarch Middle School	8-12 to 7-11
1996		
Buckinghamshire	Brushwood Middle School	8-12 to 7-11
	The Cottesloe School	12-18 to 11-18
	Chalfonts Community College	12-18 to 11-18
	Great Marlow School	12-18 to 11-18
	Waddesdon CE School	12-18 to 11-18
	Royal Grammar School	12-18 to 11-18
1997		
Buckinghamshire	Beechview Middle School	8-12 to 5-11

Departmental Wages

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time persons employed by his Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3 an hour. [4188]

Dr. Howells: At April 1997, of the people employed by DfEE (including DfEE staff in Government Offices) and the Employment Service:

Full-time staff

1,003 earned less than £4 an hour; including 788 who earned less than £3.50 an hour.

No full-time staff earned less than £3 an hour

Part-time staff

131 earned less than £4 an hour; including 40 who earned less than £3.50 an hour

No part-time staff earned less than £3 an hour

Assisted Places

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils benefit from an assisted place in the South-West Surrey constituency. [4278]

Mr. Byers: In the current academic year 1996–97, 93 children hold assisted places in three participating schools in the South-West Surrey constituency.

Teacher Training

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) for each year of operation of school-centred initial teacher training courses, what has been the average cost per annum for a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education student *(a)* at an initial teacher training institution and *(b)* on a SCITT course; [4481]

(2) how many school-centred initial teacher training courses have sought validation for the award of the Post-Graduate Certificate in Education for students on such courses; what proportion failed on *(a)* an initial validation visit and *(b)* a subsequent validation visit; and if he will make a statement; [4482]

(3) if he will list for each year of operation of school-centred initial teacher training courses (i) the total number of students in teacher training, (ii) the total number of students training on SCITT courses and (iii) the number of SCITT course trainees as a percentage of total trainees; and what estimate he has made of the number of students entering SCITT courses in the 1998–99 academic year; [4484]

(4) if he will list for each year of operation of school-centred initial teacher training courses the number of schools involved; what is his estimate of the number of schools likely to be involved in the 1998–99 academic year; and if he will make a statement. [4485]

Ms Estelle Morris: These are matters for the Teacher Training Agency. I will ask the Chairman of the Agency, Geoffrey Parker, to write to the hon. Member direct.

Mr. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many school-centred initial teacher training courses have been inspected by the Office for Standards in Education; what proportion have been judged unsatisfactory; and if he will make a statement. [4483]

Ms Morris: This is a matter for the Office for Standards in Education. I have asked the Chief Inspector to write to the hon. Member.

Building Projects

Mr. Charles Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance his Department currently offers to universities, colleges of higher education and further education corporations to ensure that they take into full account the environmental impact of new building projects. [4513]

Dr. Howells: Universities and colleges of further and higher education are autonomous, private sector bodies, responsible for the maintenance and development of their own estates. The Department does not issue any guidance to them about the environmental impact of new buildings. Of course, all buildings work must conform to the relevant planning and environmental health legislation.

Mr. Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance his Department currently offers to local education authorities to ensure that they take into full account the environmental impact of new building projects. [4514]

Mr. Byers: The Schools Environmental Assessment Methodology (SEAM) was published in 1996. It is intended to help designers of new schools—and major building projects at existing schools—to minimise the environmental impact of their designs and the materials they specify, and create school buildings which are in harmony with their surroundings.

SEAM also enables schools to monitor their own energy use and provides opportunities for pupils to learn about the environment.

Ethnic Minority Funding

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment by what date staff employed on current section 11 funded projects will need to be given notice of redundancy; what estimate he has made of the length of time needed by schools and local education authorities to prepare bids for new projects funded under section 11 or similar provisions; whom he has consulted on future arrangements for section 11 funding; and if he will make a statement. [4486]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have been asked to reply.

We are well aware of the need to reach conclusions about future arrangements for section 11 funding in good time for any necessary arrangements to be made.

If questions of redundancy arise, they will depend on arrangements between the individuals concerned and their employers.

Special Advisers

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 10 June, *Official Report*, column *369*, on the number of special advisers in his Department, if an additional special adviser has not been appointed. [4238]

Mr. Blunkett: No additional advisers have been appointed since my previous reply. However, I am in the process of seeking approval from the Prime Minister to appoint an additional part-time adviser to share a full-time post with Sophie Linden, my existing part-time adviser.

This will bring my complement of special advisers to 1 full-time and 2 part-time advisers occupying 2 full time posts.

DEFENCE

Training

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will provide details of joint training exercises that British Special Forces have undertaken with *(a)*

Australian, *(b)* Malaysian, *(c)* New Zealand and *(d)* other Association of South-East Asian Nations special forces. [2779]

Dr. Reid: For reasons which are widely understood, it has been my Department's normal practice not to comment on the activities of the UK Special Forces. This practice will continue but will be kept under review in the light of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will provide details of the countries and military, security, paramilitary, police or special forces units which have received training in the United Kingdom MOD close quarter battle and internal security training facilities. [2777]

Dr. Reid: It has been the practice in the past not to release details of military assistance provided to other countries on the grounds that this information is confidential between governments and disclosure would risk damaging our international relations. This practice is now being reviewed against the background of the government's commitment to openness. I will write to my hon. Friend once the review is complete.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the training provided by Britain's SAS to Indonesian military, police, paramilitary and special forces. [2778]

Dr. Reid: For reasons which are widely understood, it has been the Department's normal practice not to comment on the activities of the UK Special Forces. This practice will continue but will be kept under review in the light of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which countries and specific military, paramilitary, security, police or special forces units have received training at MOD facilities through formal or informal arrangements with private companies. [2781]

Dr. Reid: It has been the practice in the past not to release details of military assistance provided to other countries on the grounds that this information is confidential between governments and disclosure would risk damaging our international relations. This practice is now being reviewed against the background of the government's commitment to openness. I will write to my hon. Friend once the review is complete.

US–UK Classification Guide

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when Her Majesty's Government received from the United States Government a copy of the document "A Joint Classification Guide for Exchange and Safeguards of Material between the United States and United Kingdom, CG–UK–1", completed in May 1996, and forwarded for approval for release by the Office of Declassification of the United States Department of Energy. [2679]

Dr. Reid: A copy of the document referred to, the reference of which is CG–UK–1, was received by British Defence Staff in Washington in draft form on 20 June, 1996. Approval for release was not requested.

MOD Police (Colchester Garrison)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will restore the number of Ministry of Defence police constables operating within the Colchester Garrison to that obtaining on 1 January 1997. [3522]

Dr. Reid: Having examined the position, I am content that the complement of 21 Ministry of Defence police constables at the Colchester Garrison is satisfactory to meet the MOD police responsibilities there.

Defence Exhibition, Farnborough

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the companies exhibiting at the Royal Navy and British Army Equipment Exhibition in Farnborough in September 1997. [3592]

Mr. Spellar: The following companies have registered to participate as exhibitors at the third Royal Navy and British Army Equipment Exhibition:

AB Connectors Ltd.
Aeroflex Hose and Engineering Ltd.
Aireshelta
Alvis Industries Ltd.
Applied Visuals Ltd.
Archer Communications Systems Ltd.
Armourshield Ltd.
Avimo Ltd.
Avon Technical Products
B.C.B. International Ltd.
Babcock Facilities Management Ltd.
Basys Marine Ltd.
Beechwood Equipment
Blair Catton Defence Products
Bolle UK Ltd.
British Aerospace
British Naval Equipment Association
BTR Group
Burmarc Ltd.
CAE Invertron (CAE Electronics plc)
Case United Kingdom Ltd.
Chemring Group plc
CMN Support Services Ltd.
CMT Dynamics
Cogent Defence Systems
Colebrand Ltd.
Combined Services Publications Ltd.
Cummins Engine Company Ltd.
David Brown Defence Equipment Ltd.
Defence Manufacturers Association
DESO—British Army Export Support Teams
Devonport Management Ltd.
Digital
DSD Ltd.
Dunlop-Beaufort Ltd.
EKA Ltd.
European Data Systems
Ferranti Technologies Ltd.
Firearms Training Systems UK Ltd.
GEC plc
GKN Westland/GKN Defence
Graseby
Greys Defence Systems Ltd.
Holt Lloyd Export Ltd.
Horstman Defence Systems Ltd
Howeden Airdynamics Group
Hunting Engineering Ltd.
Ian Allan Regalia Ltd.
Icore International Ltd.
Imagebase Technology Ltd.
Information Security Systems Ltd.
Instro Precision Ltd.
Interspiro Ltd.

ITT Defence Ltd.
Iveco Ford Truck Ltd.
J & S Franklin Ltd.
Jane's Information Group
John Crane Marine International
Kelvin Hughes Ltd.
Kidde Graviner
Kudos 2000 Ltd.
Land Rover
Leyland Trucks Ltd.
Light Alloy Ltd.
Litton Data Systems
Lockheed Martin
Logica UK Ltd.
Lynwood
Macro Engineering Co Ltd.
Mannesmann Rexroth Ltd.
Marshall Specialist Vehicles
Meggitt plc
Ministry of Defence—Defence Public Relations
ML Aviation Ltd.
National Employers Liaison Committee
National Engineering and Assessment Group
Naval Bases and Supply Agency
Nickleby and Co (Scotland) Ltd
P W Allen and Co Ltd.
Pandect Precision Components Ltd.
Park Air Electronics Ltd.
Partek Cargotec Ltd.
PDQ Emergency Homes
Peak Trailers Ltd.
Pearson Engineering Ltd.
Penman Specialist Vehicles
Photon Security Services Ltd.
Pilatus Britten-Norman
Pilkington Optronics
Premier Product Support Services
Protex Fasteners Ltd.
Racal Electronics Plc
Radamec Defence Systems
Radio Systems Ltd.
Raytheon Computer Products Europe Ltd.
Raytheon Cossor
RBR Armour Ltd.
Redifon MEL Ltd.
Rescue and Medical Services
Richmond Electronics and Engineering International Ltd.
Rolls-Royce plc
RTK Marine
S and D Security (Equipment) Ltd.
Scottish Trade International
Seymour Systems Ltd.
Shorts Missile Systems Ltd.
Siemens Plessey Systems
Silicon Graphics Computer Systems
Simrad Optronics Ltd.
Spanset Ltd.
Stella Meta
Stonebridge Facilities Ltd.
Stop-Choc Ltd.
Television Installation Services (Mansfield) Ltd.
The Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency
The Friends of the Royal Engineer Museum
Thomson-Thorn Missile Electronics
Toye Kenning and Spencer
TRL Technology Ltd.
UCC International Ltd.
Ultra Electronics Ltd.
Universal Vehicles Group
Varity Perkins
Vickers Defence Systems
Vosper Thornycroft
W L Gore and Associates (UK) Ltd.
W Vinten Ltd.
Westair Ltd.
W S Atkins

Trident

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will take steps to reduce the yield of Trident warheads in the light of the opinion of the International Court of Justice on the use of nuclear weapons. [3951]

Dr. Reid: Pending the achievement of the Government's goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons, the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion does not require a change in the United Kingdom's nuclear policy.

Departmental Wages

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time persons employed by his Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3 an hour. [4190]

Dr. Reid: The information requested is shown in the table below for MoD civilian staff. The number of staff shown as earning less than a given figure includes those also shown in any lower pay category.

	Number of civilian staff	
Number of staff earning less than £X per hour	*Full-time*	*Part-time*
£4.00	4,432	685
£3.50	3,050	416
£3.00	246	1

It is not possible to provide meaningful comparable figures for Service personnel in the form sought by the right hon. Member. Members of the Armed Forces are not paid by the hour. Nor do the long hours worked by many Service personnel equate to the average civilian working week; a factor which the Armed Forces Pay Review Body takes into account when making its annual recommendations to the Prime Minister.

MOD Homes (Colchester)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the number and proportion of Ministry of Defence homes currently vacant in Colchester; how many homes the Ministry of Defence has sold in the past year, and to whom. [4034]

Mr. Spellar: There are 1,361 properties on the Colchester family quarters estate of which 138 (10.1 per cent.) are currently vacant. Of the 138 properties, 75 have been allocated to incoming families; nine have been set aside for major refurbishment and 36 have been identified for possible short-term leasing. The future of the remaining 18 remains under review.

Within the past year, nine family quarters have been sold on the open market by the Defence Estates Organisation. I am withholding information on the companies and individuals involved in this sale for reasons of commercial confidentiality under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government information.

A further 46 houses were sold freehold to Annington Homes Ltd. as part of the asset sale in November 1996.

Married Quarters

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the review being undertaken of the terms of disposal of the Ministry of Defence married quarters estates to the Nomura Investment Bank. [4043]

Mr. Spellar: The sale was completed on 5 November 1996. The Government is monitoring carefully the operation of the new arrangements.

Accommodation Units (Uxbridge)

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many accommodation units are currently empty on the RAF Uxbridge site. [4045]

Mr. Spellar: Of the 609 families quarters at RAF Uxbridge, 79 are currently vacant. Of these vacant quarters, 17 are allocated to incoming families and 44 are currently undergoing major works. The remaining 18 empty quarters fall within a total of 24 properties which are under review for possible release to Annington Homes.

Plastic Baton Rounds

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons no announcement was made in April that faulty plastic baton rounds that had been in use for three years were being withdrawn. [4542]

Dr. Reid: My hon. Friend will be aware that these events relate to a previous Administration. I am advised by officials that issues concerning the performance of plastic baton rounds were under consideration between the departments concerned and no decision had then been reached on the form or timing of a public announcement.

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what was the highest muzzle velocity of the plastic baton rounds recently found to exceed the upper limit in the equipment specification; and what is that upper limit; [4541]

(2) how often stocks of plastic baton rounds in operational use before April 1997 were tested to ensure that muzzle velocities were in line with the equipment specification; [4538]

(3) what tests were carried out by his Department on the faulty batch of plastic baton rounds supplied in 1994 and recently withdrawn from service; [4543]

(4) what action is being taken against the manufacturers of the plastic baton rounds issued from early 1994 which have been found to have a muzzle velocity in excess of the upper limit in the equipment specification; [4540]

(5) how many plastic baton rounds were withdrawn from operational use in April; how they are to be disposed of; who manufactured them; and what is the estimated cost of each round. [4544]

Dr. Reid: The highest muzzle velocity of plastic baton rounds recently tested was 76 metres per second; the upper limit specified in the contract is 70 m/s.

All batches of rounds were tested by the Contractor at the time of manufacture to enable the Department to accept them against the proof specification.

In addition to initial Contractor proofing, the following tests were carried out. In 1995 trials were carried out on a number of rounds manufactured in 1994 as a part of the ongoing baton round development programme. Assessment of these initial tests in early 1996 indicated that some of the rounds were going marginally faster than the specified velocity, but the tests were not considered conclusive. Reproofing trials of the 1994 rounds started in April 1997 and the results have yet to be established. Further tests were carried out in 1996 on rounds manufactured in 1996 which indicated that those rounds did not exceed the maximum specified velocity.

The issue of possible action against the manufacturer will be considered when all of the facts have been established.

Approximately 45,000 rounds were withdrawn from service in April 1997; they will be disposed of either by reworking or incineration. I am withholding information about the name of the manufacturer under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. The cost of each round is approximately £6.

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what are the rules for the use of plastic baton rounds by members of the armed forces in Northern Ireland; on how many occasions they have been used by members of the armed forces in Northern Ireland since the batch with and excessive muzzle velocity was supplied in 1994; and if he will list the dates on which and the places where they were used; [4546]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of plastic baton rounds used by the armed forces in Northern Ireland since the batch with an excessive muzzle velocity was supplied in 1994. [4545]

Dr. Reid: The use of force in Northern Ireland is governed by the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 which provides that "A person may use such force as is reasonable in the circumstances in the prevention of crime, or in effecting or assisting the lawful arrest of offenders or suspected offenders or of persons unlawfully at large". Plastic baton rounds are used by the armed forces in situations of violent disorder where life or property is at risk and their use is judged to be minimum and reasonable force in the circumstances. They must be fired at selected persons and not indiscriminately and should be aimed so they strike the lower part of the body. Soldiers are fully trained in their use.

As at 17 June 1997, a total of 1,424 plastic baton rounds had been used by the armed forces in Northern Ireland since the batch with an excessive muzzle velocity was supplied in May 1994, not all of which were from that batch.

I will write to my hon. Friend with a schedule of the dates and places where these baton rounds have been used, once this has been prepared.

Special Advisers

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will indicate the number of salaries of his Department's special advisers falling within the range of *(a)* £24,349–£29,999, *(b)* £30,000–£34,999, *(c)* £35,000–£39,999, *(d)* £40,000–£44,999, *(e)* £45,000–£49,999,

(f) £50,000–£54,999, *(g)* £55,000–£59,999, *(h)* 60,000–£64,999, *(i)* £65,000–£69,999 and *(j)* £70,000–£73,484. [4557]

Mr. George Robertson: Consistent with the practice of previous administrations, and to protect the privacy of individuals, only aggregate information on the salaries of Special Advisers will be published.

Once all salaries have been agreed, the number of advisers paid in each of the appropriate £10,000 bands will be published.

Building Projects

Mr. Charles Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what guidance his Department currently applies in ensuring that full account is taken of the environmental impact of its new building projects in Britain. [4516]

Mr. Spellar: My Department carries out an environmental assessment on all new buildings likely to generate environmental effects. The environmental assessment is included in the formal consultations with the local planning authority as part of the planning process.

Strategic Defence Review

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what will be the scope of the proposed Strategic Defence Review; by whom it will be undertaken; and when the results are expected. [3632]

Mr. George Robertson: I have today written to all right hon. and hon. Members setting out the scope of the Strategic Defence Review and how we propose it will be undertaken. I have placed a copy of my letter in the Library of the House. I expect the Review to be completed around the turn of the year.

Market Testing

Mr. Jim Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what decision he has reached on the future of the market testing programme within his Department. [4978]

Mr. Spellar: The Government support market testing as one of several means at their disposal to secure better value for money in the provision of public services. There is, however, no dogmatic preference for private over public provision or vice versa, or for market testing where it is not appropriate. On this basis we have reviewed the Department's market testing programme and have set out our conclusions in a policy statement on getting the best value from defence resources. This is being widely distributed within the Department, to the Trade Unions and other staff representatives and to industry associations. I am placing a copy of the statement in the Library of the House.

The statement emphasises the imperative for continuous improvements in efficiency; pays tribute to the huge contribution made by the Department's Service and Civil Service personnel working together; welcomes private sector involvement where this is cost-effective; and enjoins managers throughout the Department to pursue best value from defence resources in a manner which is rigorous, undoctrinaire, open minded and scrupulously fair.

Future projects will be judged against the policy statement at their key stages. We expect to announce the outcome in relation to several ongoing projects shortly.

Meteorological Office

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what performance targets have been set for the Meteorological Office for 1997–98. [5062]

Mr. Spellar: The Chief Executive of the Meteorological Office is responsible for providing quality meteorological and related services for the government, the armed forces, the public, aviation and commercial customers. During 1997–98, the Meteorological Office will be set the following challenging targets:

(a) to improve the Global Numerical Prediction (NWP) Index by eight index points from a baseline of 100, over a rolling three year period ending March 1998;

(b) to improve the UK NWP Index by four index points from a baseline of 100 in 1996–97;

(c) to achieve an index point improvement in the Service Quality Index from a baseline of 100 for 1996–97;

(d) to improve efficiency in year by four index points as measured by the agreed Efficiency Index;

(e) to achieve an overall Return on Capital Employed of at least 11.6 per cent. averaged over the two years 1997–98 and 1998–99 (not less than seven per cent. in year); and,

(f) to achieve a total contribution to core and central services from commercial activity of £3 million.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

33. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** To ask the Attorney-General what proposals he has for relieving the Crown Prosecution Service of unnecessary bureaucracy. [2925]

35. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Attorney-General what measures he proposes to increase the efficiency of the prosecution service. [2927]

The Attorney-General: The independent review which I announced to the House on 12 June 1997 will examine the organisation and structure of the Crown Prosecution Service, its policies and procedures and consider whether and, if so, what changes are necessary in order to provide for the more effective and efficient prosecution of crime through local public prosecutors.

34. **Mr. Greenway:** To ask the Attorney-General when he expects to review guidance to Crown prosecutors. [2926]

The Attorney-General: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend, the Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas). That Review will examine internal guidance including the Code for Crown Prosecutors.

Racial Hatred

36. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Attorney-General how many prosecutions there have been for incitement to racial hatred in each of the last five years. [2929]

The Attorney-General: In the last five years, the Law Officers have consented to the prosecution of 31 defendants for offences of incitement to racial hatred under Part III of the Public Order Act 1986.

Cigarettes (Sales to Children)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Attorney-General how many successful prosecutions there have been *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in Nottinghamshire in each of the last five years of retailers for selling cigarettes to children under 16 years of age. [3450]

The Attorney-General: Offences of selling tobacco to children are generally prosecuted by local Trading Standards offices, and proceedings are handled by the Crown Prosecution Service only on those occasions when they are initiated by the police.

No figures are available for the cases handled by the Crown Prosecution Service since the CPS does not maintain central records by reference to particular offences. The Home Office have, however, provided the following statistics for the number of defendants proceeded against at magistrates' courts and convicted at all courts for the offence of selling cigarettes to persons under 16[1] in Nottinghamshire Police Force Area and England and Wales 1991–95.

	1991	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Nottinghamshire police force area:					
Prosecutions	4	4	—	3	1
Convictions	4	4	—	3	1
England and Wales:					
Prosecutions	101	74	143	98	155
Convictions	85	57	108	80	128

[1] An offence under the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 Section 7 as amended by the Children and Young Persons (Protection from Tobacco) Act 1991 Section 1.

Source:
Home Office.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Departmental Documents

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to his answer of 11 June, *Official Report*, column *450*, what percentage of archival units produced by Government departments in 1965 have been *(a)* retained by Government departments with a specific future date identified for release into the public domain and *(b)* retained by Government departments with no specific future date identified for release into the public domain. [4311]

Mr. Hoon: The Question concerns a specific operational matter on which the Chief Executive of the Public Record Office is best placed to provide an answer and I have accordingly asked the Chief Executive to reply direct.

Letter from Nicholas Cox to Mr. Norman Baker, dated 18 June 1997:

In the absence of the Chief Executive on business I have been asked by the Lord Chancellor's Parliamentary Secretary to reply for the Public Record Office to your question about the above.

The great majority of records produced by Government departments in 1965 will by now have been destroyed under the normal arrangements for handling public records. Neither the Public Record Office nor Government departments kept statistics at that date of quantities of records created or destroyed, so that it is not now possible to give percentage figures for those records retained by their department.

Approvals given by the Lord Chancellor for retention of records all give a date by which the approval is to be reconsidered. As stated in the White Paper *Open Government* (Cm 2290 July 1993), paragraph 9.24, records retained by departments for other than administrative reasons are subject to regular review, ie at least every 10 years.

The Chief Executive, Mrs Tyacke, or I would be very pleased to discuss any of these matters with you further, if you wished.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to his answer of 11 June, *Official Report*, column *450*, what percentage of the archival units passed to the Public Record Office from all Government departments in 1965 and what actual number have been subsequently *(a)* released into the public domain in their entirety and *(b)* released into the public domain in part. [4312]

Mr. Hoon: The Question concerns a specific operational matter on which the Chief Executive of the Public Record Office is best placed to provide an answer and I have accordingly asked the Chief Executive to reply direct.

Letter from Nicholas Cox to Mr. Norman Baker, dated 18 June 1997:

In the absence of the Chief Executive on business, I have been asked by the Lord Chancellor's Parliamentary Secretary to reply for the Public Record Office to your question about the above.

During 1965 47,865 archival units were transferred to the Public Record Office.

To produce actual and percentage figures for those archival units which have been subsequently released either in whole or in part could only be done by checking against each individual item its expected and actual release date, and to do so would incur disproportionate cost.

The Public Record Office estimates that around 1 per cent. of its holdings are unavailable because they are closed for longer than 30 years.

The Chief Executive, Mrs Tyacke, or I would be very pleased to discuss any of these matter with you further, if you wished.

Legal Services Ombudsman

Mr. Gunnell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Legal Services Ombudsman intends to publish his sixth Annual report. [4873]

Mr. Hoon: The Legal Services Ombudsman has today published his sixth Annual Report, and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

TREASURY

Devolution

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to limit the powers of the Chancellor to itemise funds voted for Wales following devolution; and if he will make a statement. [2934]

Mr. Darling: Treasury Ministers are discussing financial arrangements for devolution with the Secretary of State for Wales and other Ministers. The outcome of these discussions will be set out in the White Papers which we intend to publish shortly.

Public Expenditure Surveys

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had regarding the dates of future public expenditure surveys and their publication; and if he will make a statement. [3678]

Mr. Darling: We promised in our Election Manifesto to conduct a comprehensive spending review, the details of which I announced in the House on 11 June.

Public Borrowing

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his golden rule on public borrowing. [3423]

Mr. Darling: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) on 12 June 1997 *Official Report*, column *568*.

UK Trade

Dr. Fox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what studies the Treasury has commissioned to identify the currencies in which the United Kingdom's trade is denominated. [3315]

Mrs. Liddell: The most recent official data on the currency of invoice of UK trade can be found in the Central Statistical Office's Business Bulletin, Issue 12/89 "Currency of Invoicing", published on the 15 December 1989. The currency of invoice of UK trade is one of many factors the Treasury considers in assessing the short-run impact of exchange rate changes on the economy.

Bank of England (Monetary Policy)

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what parliamentary scrutiny there will be of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee. [3321]

Mrs. Liddell: The new arrangements will provide for the Bank to make regular reports and give evidence to the Treasury Select Committee. The Committee will have the opportunity to examine the Bank's performance on monetary policy on a regular basis, and the House will be able to debate the Bank's Annual Report.

Departmental Correspondence

Mr. Luff: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what targets he has set for ministers in his Department to respond to correspondence from hon. Members; and if he will make a statement. [3543]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: Ministers aim to reply in 15 working days to letters relating to Treasury business, in 18 days to correspondence concerning the Chancellor's other departments and in 23 days where a report is required from a local office.

Public Expenditure

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the arrangements for the autumn 1997 Public Expenditure Round. [3519]

Mr. Darling: We do not intend to hold a Public Expenditure Survey in 1997 but intend to conduct a Comprehensive Spending Review, the details of which I announced in the House on 11 June.

Budget

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which organisations have so far made representations to him about the Budget on 2 July; and, of those, which have been invited to the Treasury to make personal representations to *(a)* Treasury ministers and *(b)* Treasury officials. [3367]

Dawn Primarolo: We have received written representations from many organisations, some of which have met Treasury ministers and officials.

Drugs

Mr. Heald: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the street value of drugs smuggled into the United Kingdom in 1996–97. [3557]

Dawn Primarolo: Information available on a wholly illicit market is insufficient for making any reliable assessments of the street value of drugs illegally imported into the United Kingdom.

Fuel Duty

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to paragraph 6.62 of the Financial Statement and Budget report 1997–98, if he remains committed to increasing fuel duty on average by at least 5 per cent. a year in real terms. [3381]

Dawn Primarolo: I cannot anticipate my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's Budget Statement.

Oil Taxation

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what review of oil taxation is being conducted inside his Department. [3247]

Dawn Primarolo: All aspects of the tax system are kept under continual review.

Scottish Environment Protection Agency

Dr. Godman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to enable the Scottish Environment Protection Agency to obtain VAT refunds; and if he will make a statement. [4208]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* I have no plans to allow SEPA to claim VAT refunds in respect of its non-business expenditure. Tax liabilities of publicly funded bodies are taken into account when setting levels of public expenditure in Scotland.

Knight Williams & Co. Ltd.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what recent steps he has taken to ensure that former clients of Knight Williams & Co. Ltd. receive adequate compensation; [4525]

(2) if he will make a statement on the use of the locked box agreement to satisfy investors' claims against Knight Williams & Co. Ltd. [4524]

Mrs. Liddell: I welcome the fact that the Investors Compensation Scheme has now started to make offers of compensation to investors. I hope that progress will not be unnecessarily delayed. The Securities and Investments Board have made it clear to investors that their actions in relation to the "locked box" will not affect investors' rights to claim either on the ICS or in the Knight Williams & Co. liquidation.

Inland Revenue Officers

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* VAT and *(b)* Inland Revenue officers were in post on 6 May. [4009]

Dawn Primarolo: Staff in post numbers for the beginning of May 1997 are *(a)* 23,315 in Customs and Excise as a whole, of which some 6,850 are operational VAT officers, and *(b)* 53,500 Inland Revenue officers.

BP Shares

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the Government sold its BP shares. [3772]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The last of the Government's shareholding in BP was sold in December 1995.

Tax Levy

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what statements have been made by Ministers on the eligibility of *(a)* companies never nationally owned and never privatised and *(b)* BP for a special tax levy. [3773]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: Ministers have made it clear that the windfall tax will be levied on the excess profits of the privatised utilities. Details will be announced in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget statement on 2 July.

General Government Expenditure

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has to change the definition of general government expenditure. [4050]

Mr. Darling: General government expenditure (GGE) is defined by the Office for National Statistics on the basis of national accounts concepts. The introduction of the new European System of Accounts (ESA95) in 1998 will lead to some changes in national accounts which will affect GGE.

PSBR

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will revise the definitions of capital spending by local authorities to exclude investment in, and purchase of, long-term assets from the public sector borrowing requirement; and if he will make a statement. [4204]

Mr. Darling: We have no plans to change the definition of capital spending by local authorities included in the calculation of the public sector borrowing requirement.

Tourism

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received from *(a)* the English Tourist Board, *(b)* the Welsh Tourist Board and *(c)* the British Resorts' Association regarding the impact on tourism of a national minimum wage. [4023]

Mrs. Liddell: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has not received any representations from these organisations on this matter. The UK tourist industry must compete on the quality of its product and service. The introduction of a national minimum wage, by helping to create a better rewarded and better motivated workforce, will drive up standards and promote business.

Interest Rates

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the effects of a 0.5 per cent. increase in interest and mortgage rates on *(a)* inflation and *(b)* economic growth over one year. [4275]

Mrs. Liddell: The effects of changes in interest rates cannot be precisely estimated. In general, increased interest rates can be expected to result in lower underlying inflation and economic growth in the following year than would have occurred otherwise.

Budget Projections

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to publish the report by the Comptroller and Auditor General on the assumptions for the 1997 Budget projections. [5077]

Mr. Gordon Brown: The report is being published today as a Command Paper. Copies are available in the Vote Office.

WALES

Welsh Assembly

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what studies his Department has undertaken of the effect on jobs and investment in Wales of the creation of a Welsh Assembly. [2936]

Mr. Ron Davies: None, but my Department is keeping these issues under review.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales which of the non-departmental public bodies in Wales exercise powers previously exercised by local authorities. [3737]

Mr. Ron Davies: Both the Higher and Further Education Funding Councils exercise powers to fund education institutions that were previously exercised by local authorities.

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales which of the non-departmental public bodies in Wales are *(a)* specialist and advisory and *(b)* executive; and what is the annual grant-in-aid to each. [3738]

Mr. Davies: The information requested is as follows:

Table A

Advisory NDPBs and tribunals[1]	*1997–98 Grant-in-aid budget* £
Environment Agency Advisory Committee for Wales	Nil
Agriculture Dwelling House Advisory Committee	Nil
Hill Farming Advisory Sub-Committee	Nil
Historical Buildings Council for Wales	Nil
Ancient Monuments Board for Wales	Nil
Local Government Boundary Commission for Wales	500,000
Staff Commission for Wales	11,000
Welsh Council for Post Graduate Medical and Dental Education	Nil
Welsh Scientific Advisory Committee	Nil
Welsh Medical Committee	Nil
Welsh Optical Committee	Nil
Welsh Dental Committee	Nil
Welsh Nursing and Midwifery Committee	Nil
Welsh Pharmaceutical Committee	Nil
Welsh Committee for Post Graduate Pharmaceutical Education	5,968
Library and Information Services Council (Wales)	9,000
Place Names Advisory Committee	Nil
Welsh Industrial Development Advisory Board	Nil
Welsh Committee on Drugs and Alcohol Misuse	10,000
Valuation Tribunals (Wales)	Nil
Registered Inspectors Appeals Tribunal (Wales)	Nil
Mental Health Review Tribunal for Wales	Nil
Agricultural Land Tribunal (Wales)	Nil
Rent Assessment Panel for Wales	Nil

[1] Generally, advisory NDPBs do not employ staff or incur expenditure on their own account.

Table B

Executive NDPBS	*1997–98 Grant-in-aid budget* £
Welsh Development Agency	83,460,000
Development Board for Rural Wales	9,480,000
Wales Tourist Board	14,570,000
Cardiff Bay Development Corporation	47,919,000
Land Authority for Wales	nil
Countryside Council for Wales	23,300,000
National Museums and Galleries of Wales	12,327,000
National Library of Wales	5,991,000
Sports Council for Wales	6,596,000
Welsh Language Board	5,748,000
Arts Council of Wales	14,459,000
Tai Cymru	2,770,000
Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales	9,100,000
Welsh National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting	975,000

Table B

Executive NDPBS	*1997–98 Grant-in-aid budget* £
Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales	1,391,000
Higher Education Funding Council for Wales	236,787,000
Further Education Funding Council for Wales	174,599,000
Residuary Body for Wales	nil
Agricultural Wages Committee	nil

Speech Therapy

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he is taking to recruit more speech therapists in Wales. [4459]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The recruitment of NHS staff is a matter for individual Trusts. Additional funding is being provided from 1997–98 onwards to increase the numbers of students being trained and to enhance the number of clinical placements across Wales. This will encourage recruitment in areas where qualified Speech and Language Therapists are required. I will be keeping a close watch on progress in recruiting qualified Speech and Language Therapists.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Drugs Research Unit

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the terms of reference of, and funding provisions for, the drug utilisation research unit at Queen's University, Belfast. [4012]

Mr. Worthington *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* A contractual agreement between the Department of Health and Social Services for Northern Ireland and the Queen's University of Belfast sets out detailed terms of reference for DURU, listed below.

The Unit (DURU) shall:

- continue the work of the Department's (DHSS) Prescribing Information Unit of visiting general medical practitioners to encourage safer and more cost-effective prescribing and to collect further data on prescribing habits, consultation profiles, locum and home visit arrangements and other information necessary to understand present behaviour and to develop better prescribing practice;
- develop the work of the Prescribing Information Unit by advising, supporting and assisting the officers of the Health and Social Services Boards in making general medical practitioners aware of their prescribing patterns;
- collect and collate all available data on drug utilisation and construct a comprehensive prescribing data-base;
- support the work of the Royal College of General Practitioners in updating and disseminating the use of the practice formulary and other guides to rational prescribing, and to analyse the reluctant benefits;
- seek the optimal format for conveying new essential drug information to general medical practitioners;
- compile statistics on self-poisoning;
- identify inappropriate prescribing;

relate utilisation to indices of morbidity and analyse the reasons for intra and inter-regional variations;

encourage and assist all hospital medical staff in improving the rationality and cost-effectiveness of their prescribing by the development and application of agreed hospital formularies and to assess the success of self-regulation.

Running costs of DURU are met by an annual grant provided by the Department of Health and Social Services, as stated in the agreement with the Queen's University of Belfast. Funding for the year ending March 1997 amounted to £312,667.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the terms of reference and membership of the review committee on the work of the drug utilisation research unit, Queen's University, Belfast; what representations she has received concerning the outcome of the review committee's recommendations; and if she will make a statement. [4013]

Mr. Worthington *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* The terms of reference for the review of DURU were to assess four dimensions of the unit's work, comprising: scientific quality; policy, service relevance and value; management and accountability; and options for future management and funding.

The Review Team comprised the following three members: Professor Mike Rawlins, Department of Pharmacological Science, University of Newcastle; Professor Peter Noyce, Department of Pharmacy, University of Manchester; and Dr. Colin Bradley, Department of General Practice, University of Birmingham.

The Department has received written correspondence regarding the outcome of the review of DURU from Martin Caton (MP), David Morris (MEP) and Dr. McGavock, Director of DURU. The decision not to renew the contract for DURU was based on the Review Team's recommendations and peer review of those recommendations. Nothing subsequently raised in correspondence to the Department gives cause to change the original decision.

Plastic Baton Rounds

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the number of plastic baton rounds used by the Royal Ulster Constabulary since the batch with an excessive muzzle velocity was supplied in 1994. [4550]

Mr. Ingram: A total of 7,437 plastic baton rounds have been used by the RUC since ammunition manufactured in 1994 was issued on 18 May 1994.

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the *(a)* number of people injured by plastic baton rounds since 1994 and *(b)* rate of injury per round used; and what are the figures for the previous three year period. [4549]

Mr. Ingram: There have been 94 alleged injuries associated with incidents involving use of plastic baton rounds between 1 January 1994 and 24 April 1997. This is a rate of one alleged injury for each 94 rounds fired (compared with a rate of one injury for each 95 rounds fired for the period 18 May 1994 to 25 April 1997).

The figures for the previous three years are as follows:

Year	*Alleged injuries*	*Rounds fired*	*Injuries/rounds fired*
1993	14	523	1/37.3
1992	8	77	1/11
1991	10	323	1/32.3

These statistics are based on total security force firings.

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when plastic baton rounds were first used in Northern Ireland; how many rounds have been used to the latest available date; and how many deaths and injuries have been caused to *(a)* adults and *(b)* children over that period. [4553]

Mr. Ingram: Plastic baton rounds were first used in Northern Ireland in 1973, and a total of 65,204 rounds have been used. There have been 14 fatalities associated with their use. There have been 565 alleged injuries associated with incidents involving plastic baton rounds since 1981 when records of these were first kept.

Of the 14 people killed, seven were under 16 years of age. The last fatality was in August 1989.

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on what date the Royal Ulster Constabulary discovered that plastic baton rounds in use since 1994 had excessive muzzle velocities; on what date they were withdrawn; and how many of the faulty rounds were used by the RUC between those two dates. [4547]

Mr. Ingram: Rounds manufactured in 1994 entered service with the RUC on 18 May 1994. The RUC received notification from the MOD on 24 March 1997 that some 1994 rounds were outside the agreed specification.

All 1994 rounds were withdrawn by 25 April 1997.

The number of rounds with muzzle velocities in excess of the upper limit which were supplied to the RUC or actually used is not known.

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the rules for the use of plastic baton rounds by the Royal Ulster Constabulary; on how many occasions they have been used by the RUC since the batch with an excessive muzzle velocity was issued in 1994; and if she will list the dates on which and places where they were used. [4551]

Mr. Ingram: The use of plastic baton rounds is governed by section 3 of the Criminal Law Act 1967 which provides that "A person may use such force as is reasonable in the circumstances in the prevention of crime, or in effecting or assisting the lawful arrest of offenders or suspected offenders or of persons unlawfully at large."

The RUC's operational guidelines specify that baton guns will be used only "in accordance with the principle of the minimum and reasonable amount of force necessary in the protection of life and property, the preservation of the peace and the prevention and detection of crime." They also place limitations on the firing of baton rounds at a range of less than 20 metres to situations where the safety of police officers or others is seriously threatened, direct that firing should be at selected persons and not indiscriminately at the crowd, and aimed so that they

strike the lower part of the target's body direct. A higher point of aim is permitted only if the safety of police officers or others is seriously threatened and the attacker's body is shielded from the firer.

In his 1996 Inspection of the RUC Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary reported that "The RUC conditions/restrictions in use are clearly defined and accord with those issued by the Home Secretary to Forces in England and Wales, save that the authority levels for use of baton rounds and their subsequent operational controls are lower."

The RUC, in conjunction with ACPO colleagues, in England and Wales is currently revising guidelines on the use of baton rounds with a view to recommending common guidelines for use by police throughout the United Kingdom.

I will write to the hon. Member with the further information he requests once it has been prepared.

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how the RUC discovered that plastic baton rounds in use since 1994 had an excessive muzzle velocity; and if she will make a statement. [4548]

Mr. Ingram: The RUC received notification from the MOD on 24 March 1997 that some rounds manufactured in 1994 were outside the agreed specification.

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the numbers of each type of injury caused by plastic baton rounds since 1994. [4552]

Mr. Ingram: It is not possible to provide the information in the form requested. There have been 94 alleged injuries from incidents involving the use of plastic baton rounds from 1 January 1994 to 24 April 1997.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Dartford River Crossing

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was his Department's evaluation of the net present value of *(a)* each of the privately financed options and *(b)* the conventionally financed alternatives for the Dartford river crossing. [49]

Ms Glenda Jackson: When compared on the same basis the net present values of the various private and public options were:

NPV of costs	*Dartford river crossing plc*	*Dartford river crossing plc*	*Dartford tunnel group*	*Thames tunnel company*
Structure	*Bridge*	*Immersed tube tunnels*	*Tunnel*	*Tunnel*
Privately financed options	234	240	278	271
Publicly financed options	180	191	199	201
Difference between options	54	49	79	70

Departmental Publications

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what literature for bereaved relatives and friends of those killed on the roads his Department provides; and what plans he has to fund additional publications. [3690]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand that booklets are produced by several police forces and by the voluntary organisations with whom the police work closely. Since staff from my Department do not have regular contact with bereaved relatives of those killed on the roads, nor expertise in counselling, it would not seem helpful for the Department to provide such literature.

National Air Traffic Services Computer System

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what actions he is taking to ensure that the computer system operating National Air Traffic Services is not affected by the millennium problem. [4448]

Ms Glenda Jackson: National Air Traffic Services (NATS) commenced a review of the threat to its business from the millennium problem in May 1996. It has included some 700 items of operational equipment in the review process and has already commenced remedial work in areas where there are known problems. NATS is planning to conduct further remedial work during 1997–98 prior to running extensive integration tests for assurance during the winter of 1998–99. In addition to work on internal systems and with its suppliers, NATS has also initiated discussions on the Year 2000 problem with its customers and related air traffic control organisations.

Train Operating Companies (Punctuality)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library the quarterly punctuality figures recorded by OPRAF by train operating company. [4509]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), *Official Report*, 10 June 1997, column *413*.

Bus Route Tenders (London)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what basis London Transport's tendered bus routes are allocated; and for what reason tenders are not published. [4235]

Ms Glenda Jackson: London Transport awards contracts for bus routes on the basis of best value for money. The content of tender documents is commercially confidential.

Car Clocking

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he intends to take in respect of advertisements for car clocking doctors; and if he will make a statement. [3837]

Ms Glenda Jackson: It is illegal under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 knowingly to sell a vehicle with a falsified mileage, but there is no offence of "clocking" and

it is not presently illegal to advertise a mileage correction service. Equally, it is not illegal to tamper with an odometer and there may be legitimate reasons for wanting to do so. Tampering might be an offence if, on evidence, it is found that such an action assisted in the commissioning of an offence.

Salisbury Bypass

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what representations were made by English Heritage to the inspector during the public inquiry into the proposed Salisbury bypass; [4314]

(2) if he will place in the Library a copy of the letter from English Heritage to the Transport Minister objecting to his proposed Salisbury bypass. [4315]

Ms Glenda Jackson: English Heritage did not appear at the public inquiry to object to the proposed bypass. The Inspector had before him a folio of correspondence between the Department of Transport and English Heritage. I will place a copy of that folio in the Library together with copies of the more recent exchange in which English Heritage now indicates opposition to the proposed bypass.

Roads Programme

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he proposes to discharge the manifesto commitment to carry out a strategic review of the roads programme. [5061]

Dr. Strang: I am today launching the Roads Review. The objective of the Review will be to determine the role which roads should play in an integrated transport policy and to establish a forward investment programme for the trunk road network in England.

The Review will be broadly based. Unlike reviews carried out by the previous Government, it will not merely consider what road schemes should be added to or deleted from the trunk roads programme. It will look afresh at the environmental impact of roads and take into account parallel work on developing an integrated transport policy for the UK which my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced recently, including, in particular, work on issues such as whether steps should be taken to manage demand for travel by road, and if so, what means should be used; and, the extent to which we should encourage the use of other modes of transport. It will also consider the role which new technology and improved information systems can play; and the impact which investment in roads could have on regional development. The Roads Review, work on an integrated transport policy and the comprehensive spending review will be very closely co-ordinated.

We intend to consult widely during the Review. During the next few weeks my Department will be consulting key representative bodies both about the range of issues which need to be covered and how we might involve them effectively in the Review. We then intend to launch a public consultation in July, inviting responses by the end of October. We would particularly value contributions from the Regional Planning Conferences, local authorities and other regional bodies. We shall consider in due course what arrangements will be appropriate for continuing regional consultations on trunk road planning beyond the Review, taking account of the comments received in response to the previous Government's proposal to bring trunk roads within the Regional Planning Guidance system.

We hope to announce the conclusions of the Review next Spring. In the interim the Highways Agency will continue to take forward maintenance work, small safety schemes, and two re-signing projects in line with existing plans. Schemes on which construction is already well advanced will continue, but preparatory work on new major schemes will be put on hold at the end of the current stage, except in the relatively few cases in which some procedural step needs to be taken to ensure that work done to date is not lost should we ultimately decide that the scheme should be taken forward. Work on developer funded schemes will also continue as these schemes either have been or will be scrutinised thoroughly in the appropriate planning processes and they are generally small improvements which do not have any wider strategic significance.

There are also 12 cases on which urgent decisions are pending. We therefore propose to carry out an accelerated review of these cases against the criteria of accessibility, safety, economy and environmental impact and announce our decisions on them in July. It may be that in some of these cases we decide in July that a decision cannot be taken in advance of the main Review. In the majority of cases we will take a decision either to take the scheme forward or to abandon it. The cases in question are:

Birmingham Northern Relief Road (BNRR)
M25 Junctions 12–15
M66 Denton–Middleton Contract 3
A2/M2 Cobham J4 widening
Salisbury Bypass/Wessex Link DBFO
A564 Derby Southern Bypass Contract B
Weald and Downland DBFO
Cumbria Bradford DBFO
South Midlands Network DBFO
A40 West London Approach DBFO
A13 Thames Gateway DBFO
M62E/M606 Link Roads.

English Partnerships

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the names and salaries of the board members of English Partnerships. [4004]

Angela Eagle: The names and salaries of the board members of English Partnerships are:

	Salary from 1 April 1997 £	*Salary from 1 December 1997* £	*Days per week*
Lord Walker of Worcester MBE (Chairman)	Does not accept salary	Does not accept salary	—
Sir Idris Pearce (Deputy Chairman)	28,730	28,940	2
Bill Jordan, CBE	6,980	7,035	0.5

	Salary from 1 April 1997 £	Salary from 1 December 1997 £	Days per week
Councillor Michael Carr	6,980	7,035	0.5
Dennis Stevenson	6,980	7,035	0.5
Stephen Massey	6,980	7,035	0.5

Anthony Dunnett (Chief Executive) and Paula Hay-Plumb (Managing Director—Operations) also sit on the board as executive members.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received concerning the future of English Partnerships. [4003]

Angela Eagle: My Department receives frequent correspondence about English Partnerships' programmes and projects.

Wild Animals and Plants (Illegal Trade)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what further steps the Government plans to take to stop the illegal trade in wild animals and plants. [3800]

Angela Eagle: The Police and HM Customs are Excise are primarily responsible for enforcing the controls on the trade in wildlife. The Government is committed to supporting their work and recognises that controls on trade will contribute to wildlife conservation only if they are fully and effectively enforced.

The Government will continue to contribute to efforts to crack down on the illegal wildlife trade both at home and abroad, through its participation in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Police and Customs officers are part of the UK delegation to the CITES Conference currently taking place in Zimbabwe. The UK signed a Memorandum of Understanding on enforcement with the CITES Secretariat on 12 June. This will secure more rapid and effective exchange of information between the Secretariat and UK enforcement agencies during investigations into the illegal wildlife trade.

A new EC Regulation on the wildlife trade came into force on 1 June. The UK fully supports the new Regulation, and will continue to make a full contribution to the new EC Enforcement Working Group which was established last year.

A new Statutory Instrument, The Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Enforcement) Regulations 1997, also came into force on 1 June. It strengthens enforcement officers' powers, and increases penalties for breaches of the EC Regulation.

The Government also attaches importance to the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime. This has already shown that the Department of the Environment, the Crown Prosecution Service, the statutory enforcement agencies and responsible voluntary bodies can work together effectively in this field.

Environmental Protection Legislation

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce legislation on environmental protection. [3854]

Angela Eagle: We are considering all the mechanisms, including legislation, available for delivering our Manifesto commitment to put the environment at the heart of decision-making across Government. Much can be done administratively, such as through the initiatives which we will introduce to green government and to strengthen co-operation in the European Union on environmental issues. Where we conclude that legislation is required, we will seek appropriate opportunities to introduce it.

Water Charges

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to allow water companies to base their charges on the council tax banding of a dwelling; and if he will make a statement. [3417]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 18 June 1997]:* As the Deputy Prime Minister announced at the recent Water Summit, the Government is to review the system of charging for water. Among other issues this review will consider alternative bases of charging, including the use of council tax bands.

Environment Agency

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the responsibilities of the Environment Agency. [4226]

Angela Eagle: The Agency's main statutory responsibilities are to:

- regulate industrial processes with the greatest pollution potential;
- regulate the disposal of radioactive waste and (except on nuclear licensed sites) the keeping and use of radioactive material and accumulation of radioactive waste:
- regulate the treating, keeping, movement and disposal of controlled waste;
- preserve or improve the quality of rivers, estuaries and coastal waters;
- take any necessary action to conserve, redistribute, augment and secure proper use of water resources;
- exercise a general supervision over all matters relating to flood defence;
- maintain, improve and develop salmon, trout, freshwater and eel fisheries;
- promote the conservation and enhancement of inland and coastal waters, and their use for recreation;
- maintain or improve non-marine navigation;
- regulate the remediation of contaminated land designated as special sites; and
- administer, in accordance with regulations on producer responsibility, registration of businesses and exemption schemes.

Ms Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what responsibilities the Environment Agency has in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [4228]

Angela Eagle: The Secretary of State is the competent authority of transit for the whole of the United Kingdom for transfrontier shipments of waste under Council Regulation (EEC) No. 259/93. He has delegated the day-to-day administration of this function to the Environment Agency. Also, section 84(2)(b) of the Water Resources Act 1991 places a statutory duty on the Environment Agency to consult, in such cases as it may consider appropriate, with the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency over water quality objectives. This relates to parts of the rivers Esk, Sark and Tweed.

Ms Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for The Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the organisations replaced by the Environment Agency in 1996, indicating in each case whether they had been operating under an exemption in terms of the Value Added Tax Act 1994, section 33. [4225]

Angela Eagle: The Environment Agency was formed from:

(a) National Rivers Authority: Exempt from VAT

(b) Waste Regulation Authorities: Exempt from VAT

(c) Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Pollution and other sections of the Department of the Environment: Not exempt from VAT

Scotland

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what responsibilities he has in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [4227]

Mr. Prescott: I refer the hon. Member to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) on 3 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *158*.

Wyre Borough Council

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the factors underlying the non-receipt by Wyre borough council of the outstanding payments of ERDF non quota section: grant payments under reference number EPNW5299-72912, EPN-W529972916, EPNW52997291, EPNW52997291, EPNW-529972917, EPNW529972914, EPNW529972913 and EPNW5299-2917; and when he expects payments of the outstanding moneys to be made. [4059]

Angela Eagle: Regrettably, payment by the European Commission of the balance of ERDF due under the Non-Quota Fisheries Programme is still outstanding. This is because the European Commission have yet to approve the final annual report on the programme. The Commission have not yet formally responded, although I understand they will be seeking further clarification on a small number of details.

Officials in the Department of Trade and Industry are in touch with officials at the Commission and hope to reach a conclusion shortly, which will enable the Commission to pay the final balance. Once this ERDF is received, we will ensure that all outstanding payments to Wyre Borough Council are made promptly.

Housing

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will extend Part M of the Building Regulations to encompass new housing; and if he will make a statement. [4309]

Mr. Raynsford: I would refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave on 11 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *472*, to a similar question asked by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow).

Capital Receipts Initiative

Ms Christine Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he intends to take forward his proposals under the capital receipts initiative. [4842]

Ms Armstrong: We have today issued a consultation paper to all local authorities in England. That paper sets out our proposals for the distribution of any additional spending between local authorities.

We wish to ensure that spending generated under the receipts initiative will be directed towards priority housing needs. Capital receipts themselves, however, have not always been generated in the areas of greatest need. Some authorities have generated significant volumes of receipts but have relatively low needs. Others have had little or no scope to generate significant receipts, yet have particularly high needs. We are, therefore, proposing that resources should be allocated on the basis of one third according to the proportion of eligible set-aside receipts and the remaining two thirds in accordance with assessed need.

The paper also sets out our objectives for spending. Our intention is that the resources will be targeted on housing and housing-related regeneration schemes. We, therefore, wish to ensure that local authorities integrate the additional spending into their housing strategies, plan for badly needed repairs to dilapidated stock and support new provision where it is needed.

It is also our intention that this initiative should contribute to and complement this Government's wider policy of increasing training opportunities and leading the young unemployed into work and financial independence.

My Right hon. Friend, the Chancellor, will announce the amount of additional resources that will be available for 1997–98 and 1998–99 in the Summer budget.

Copies of the consultation paper have been placed in the Library of the House.

Garden Extensions

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce a new permitted development right for householders to extend their gardens. [4977]

Mr. Raynsford: A consultation paper was issued last November on a proposal that householders should in future be able to extend their gardens onto adjacent land, without needing to submit a planning application. The Department received 425 replies, copies of which have now been placed in the Department's library. Three hundred and sixty-one expressed opposition and only 34

offered support. Many objections concentrated on the damage impact that such a proposal could have on the open countryside with the creeping suburbanisation of specially protected areas such as the National Parks and the Green Belt. Concern was also expressed about the resulting lack of control over the erection of ancillary buildings and the absence of any size limit on the land which could be added to a garden.

The Government's view is that the impact of a proposed garden extension is best considered, as at present, through the normal planning process and my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of Wales and I have therefore decided to withdraw this proposal.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Housing Benefit

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment she has made of the impact of the £27.50 limit on the amount of rent which can be covered by housing benefit for single under-25 people; and if she will make a statement. [2237]

Mr. Bradley: There is no national limit on the amount of rent which can be covered by Housing Benefit for single people under 25. The single room rent is determined by independent Rent Officers for the locality in which the claimant lives. The single room rent restriction was introduced by the previous administration in October 1996. They initiated a monitoring exercise and we will look at the results carefully. The Government has also commissioned research to gauge the impact of this, and other measures. The results are expected next year.

Conferences (Disabled Access)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps his Department takes to make the conferences and public meetings which it sponsors accessible to disabled people, with particular reference to *(a)* the availability of hearing induction loops, *(b)* the availability of sign language facilities and *(c)* the use of accessible buildings for wheelchairs. [3976]

Mr. Field: An increasing number of the Department of Social Security buildings are accessible to disabled people, including those in wheelchairs, and have induction loop facilities for those with a hearing disability. Where accommodation outside the DSS estate is being used, organisers of events make every effort to take into account the needs of the people attending. Sign language interpreters are provided where a need is identified.

The Department has also provided training for its staff on the Disability Discrimination Act which includes reference to the provision of services to disabled people. We will continue to make progress on this important issue.

Child Support Agency

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to her answer of 3 June, *Official Report,* columns *143–44,* on the level of compliance with CSA maintenance assessments, what plans she has to review the operational effectiveness of the Child Support Agency; if she will undertake an investigation into *(a)* the types of case which are most likely to result in zero compliance and *(b)* the methods employed by the CSA to enforce compliance against those absent parents who have only ever made limited or zero contributions to their children's maintenance; what assessment she has made into the proportion of full compliance cases in which there was an existing maintenance agreement between the parents; and if she will make a statement on the effectiveness of the system of interim maintenance assessments adopted by the CSA. [4231]

Mr. Bradley: We intend to look closely at all aspects of the Child Support Agency to ensure that it provides an efficient and effective service. Children are entitled to the support of both parents wherever they live.

We expect the Agency to provide an efficient and effective service to all its clients.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Cattle Slaughter Scheme

14. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many cattle have been slaughtered in *(a)* the over-30-months scheme and *(b)* the accelerated slaughter programme. [2904]

Mr. Rooker: As at 13 June 1997, 1,494,040 cattle had been slaughtered under the over-30-months scheme, and 6,478 cattle under the Selective Cull Scheme.

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy that relevant hon. Members and local authorities will be consulted over future proposals to store carcases or rendered material from the over-30-months scheme in their constituencies or areas. [2830]

Mr. Rooker: Commission Regulation 716/96, under which the over-30-months scheme (OTMS) operates, expressly prohibits the purchase of animals showing any clinical signs of BSE. BSE suspects are being sent for direct incineration under entirely separate arrangements. Nevertheless, it is now the practice of the Intervention Board, which has executive responsibility for the day to day operation of the OTMS, to consult the Environment Agency and the local authority about the suitability of any dry or tallow storage facilities offered to it for OTMS material. The local Member of Parliament is also informed that these consultations are taking place. Contracts would be let only for stores which comply with the waste management provisions of Part II of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and related Regulations and which have, or where appropriate, are likely to be granted, local authority planning approval which would allow for the storage of meat and bone meal or tallow. No new cold storage facilities for OTMS carcases are under consideration.

Fruit Farming Industry

15. **Mr. Rowe:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to assist the fruit farming industry in the aftermath of the frosts in May. [2905]

Mr. Rooker: The European Commission has the matter under review but I have no plans to provide any further specific assistance to the fruit farming industry. It is, in any event, too early to assess the economic consequences of the recent frosts.

Fisheries Management

16. **Mr. Macdonald:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress there has been on developing regional fisheries management at the intergovernmental conference. [2906]

Mr. Morley: In the context of negotiations on the Common Fisheries Policy the European Commission has committed itself to exploring ways of developing greater involvement of local fishing interests in the decision making process. This is a welcome step forward.

Slaughterhouse Hygiene

17. **Mr. Tipping:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is taking against slaughterhouse owners who fail to implement adequate standards of hygiene. [2907]

Dr. John Cunningham: My hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has instructed the Meat Hygiene Service to enforce the Regulations vigorously. Ministers will not hesitate to revoke the licences of slaughterhouses which fail to maintain adequate hygiene standards.

Cattle Traceability

18. **Mr. Paul Marsden:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress he is making with the implementation of a cattle traceability system. [2908]

Dr. John Cunningham: I am considering responses to proposals for a computerised cattle traceability system. I intend to bring this system into effect in Great Britain as soon as possible.

Quota-hopping

19. **Mr. Lawrie Quinn:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his discussions with the European Commission on quota-hopping. [2909]

Mr. Morley: I refer my hon. Friend to the statement that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food made on 18 June 1997, *Official Report*, columns *331–44*.

Food Standards Agency

20. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what criteria will be used to determine the location of the Food Standards Agency. [2910]

Mr. Rooker: The Food Standards Agency will need to be located where it can carry out its tasks most effectively, having regard to the costs involved. We shall consider this issue further in the light of the responses to Professor James's Report.

Scrapie

21. **Mr. Bennett:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is taking to prevent risk material from sheep affected by scrapie entering the food chain. [2911]

Mr. Rooker: Sheep with scrapie and the heads of all sheep are prohibited from being used for food. On 5 June my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food announced that he intends to extend the controls to cover the spleen and for older sheep the spinal cord and to require compulsory slaughter with compensation for sheep with scrapie.

Imported Beef

22. **Mr. John Smith:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures he will take to ensure that imported beef complies with the same standards of traceability, quality and hygiene in relation to the removal of specified bovine offals on domestic beef. [2913]

23. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures are being taken to restrict imports of beef that do not conform to United Kingdom regulations introduced to guard against BSE-infected meat entering the human food chain. [2914]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Members to the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 5 June, *Official Report*, columns *227–28*.

Beef Ban

24. **Mr. Greenway:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to announce progress on negotiations on the lifting of the EU ban on British beef. [2915]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) earlier today.

BSE

25. **Mr. Ian Taylor:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the extent of BSE on the continent of Europe. [2916]

Mr. Rooker: The following table gives the total number of confirmed BSE cases in cattle in European countries other than the UK as at 27 May 1997:

Country	*Number of cases*[1]	*Number born in UK*
Denmark	1	1
France	27	0
Germany	5	5
Republic of Ireland	222	12
Italy	2	2
Netherlands	2	0
Portugal	69	7
Switzerland	250	0

[1] For Member States the numbers are those reported to the Commission under Council Directive 82/894/EEC (as amended). Figures for Switzerland were taken from notifiable disease statistics issued by the Swiss Federal Office of Veterinary Affairs.

Woodlands

26. **Mr. Bayley:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about the management of Forestry Commission woodlands in England following Scottish devolution. [2917]

Mr. Morley: We are currently considering the possible effects of Scottish devolution on the Forestry Commission. However, the responsibility for forestry in England, including the Forestry Commission's woodlands, rests with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and Scottish devolution would not affect this.

Quarantine Regulations

27. **Mr. Key:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when and in what form he will consult on changes to quarantine regulations for pet dogs and cats. [2918]

Dr. John Cunningham: Because of the wide and legitimate interest in this subject, we would expect to consult at some point on this matter. Decisions on when and how to do so have yet to be taken.

Health and the Environment

28. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures his Department is considering undertaking for the long-term health of consumers and the safety of the environment. [2919]

Mr. Morley: The Department is committed to placing protection of the public first. To that end, my officials are working in close consultation with colleagues in the Department of Health and other Departments to prepare for the establishment of a Food Standards Agency. The Agency will be responsible for assuring public health in all matters of food safety policy.

At the same time we are also taking a number of initiatives to drive up meat hygiene standards in abattoirs. Poor hygiene practices will not be tolerated and the Regulations will be enforced vigorously.

The Department has a number of measures in place to protect the environment and is considering whether further measures are necessary. Existing measures include strict approval arrangements for pesticides, Codes of Practice on protecting air, water and soil, and voluntary incentive schemes to promote environmentally friendly farming.

The Government also aims to secure reform of the CAP to reduce food prices, save money and provide more targeted support for the rural economy and enhancing the rural environment.

Badger Setts

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the damage caused to farm machinery by holes associated with badger setts; and if he will make a statement on his Department's plans to limit such damage. [3923]

Mr. Morley: The Department is aware that where badger setts undermine farm tracks or fields they can pose a serious risk to farm machinery. In such cases, farmers should apply to the relevant Regional Service Centre for a licence under the provisions of the Protection of Badgers Act 1992 to close down those holes of the sett which pose a risk.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ban the live export of animals from British ports by sea and air; and if he will make a statement. [4179]

Mr. Morley: The Government accepts that in general the export of live animals is a legal trade. However we have made clear our strong preference for meat to be exported on the hook rather than on the hoof; that we will seriously consider banning the export of calves for rearing in narrow veal crates if the European Court of Justice in its forthcoming judgment finds this to be legal; and that we wish the new EU rules on welfare in transit, as now implemented through the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997, to be strictly and scrupulously enforced. We are also reviewing current procedure relating to the inspection and certification of live animals for export.

Genetically Engineered Soya

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 9 June, *Official Report*, column *356*, what steps he is taking to ensure that tryptophan is not present in genetically engineered soya imported into the United Kingdom. [3465]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 18 June 1997]:* The amino acid tryptophan occurs naturally in a wide range of crops, including soya. In assessing the safety of the genetically modified soya, the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes compared the levels of tryptophan present with those found in non-GM varieties of soya and concluded that they were equivalent. The committee also considered the results of a range of animal feeding studies, none of which showed any adverse effects. As a further safeguard, the company which applied for the authorisation has agreed to monitor the genetic stability of the crop by providing periodic updates on the levels of nutrients in both the genetically modified and related non-genetically modified forms.

Special Advisers

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will indicate the number of salaries of his Department's special advisers falling within the range of *(a)* £24,349–£29,999, *(b)* £30,000–£34,999, *(c)* £35,000–£39,999, *(d)* £40,000–£44,999, *(e)* £45,000–£49,999, *(f)* £50,000–£54,999, *(g)* £55,000–£59,999, *(h)* £60,000–£64,999, *(i)* £65,000–£69,999 and *(j)* £70,000–£73,484. [4554]

Mr. Morley: Consistent with the practice of previous administrations and in order to protect the privacy of individuals, only aggregate information on the salaries of special advisers will be published.

Once all salaries have been agreed the number of advisers paid in each of the appropriate £10,000 bands will be published.

HEALTH

General Practitioners

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many qualified general practitioners of working age are *(a)* resident in the United Kingdom and *(b)* in practice. [3803]

Mr. Milburn: The available information was published in "General Medical Services Statistics, England and Wales", on 1 October 1996, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

Prescription Charges

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his policy on NHS prescription charges for pensioners. [3834]

Mr. Milburn: We will be examining the question of prescription charges as part of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. The Government remains committed to the historic principle of the National Health Service that health services will be available to all and access will be based on need, not on ability to pay.

Doctors and Nurses

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* doctors and *(b)* nurses are employed in the NHS currently; and in each case how many were employed in (i) 1992 and (ii) 1987. [3439]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested is given in the tables.

Table A: National Health Service Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS) doctors and General Medical Services (GMS) doctors (headcounts) in England in 1987, 1992 and 1995[1]

	1987	*1992*	*1995*
HCHS medical staff and GMS General Medical Practitioners[2] (Headcount)	69,570	75,740	[1]81,000

[1] 1995 is the latest year for which figures are available.
[2] Figures exclude hospital practitioners and clinical assistants to avoid double counting as most hospital practitioners and clinical assistants also work as general practitioners.

Table B: NHS HCHS nursing and midwifery staff and GMS practice nurses in England in 1987, 1992 and 1996[1]

	1987	*1992*	*1996*
HCHS nursing and midwifery staff and GMS practice nurses[2] (Whole–time equivalents)	336,110	353,170	[3]342,480
Not included in the above:			
HCHS Learners[4]	64,560	34,740	2,670
Project 2000 students[4]	Not applicable	18,300	34,000

Notes:
[1] 1996 is the latest year for which figures are available.
[2] Excludes agency staff.
[3] The figure for 1996 is not directly comparable with figures for earlier years because of the introduction of a new system of classifying staff in 1995.
[4] Learners are nurses on traditional nurse training courses, and are directly employed by the NHS HCHS. Project 2000 training was introduced in 1989 and has gradually replaced traditional pre-registration nurse training. Project 2000 students are funded by bursaries, they are supernumary not employees, and are thus excluded from the count of NHS HCHS nursing staff. Figures for project 2000 students are headcounts and should not be added to other nursing figures in the table which are whole-time equivalents.
1. Figures are rounded to the nearest ten.
2. HCHS figures are as at 30 September each year.
3. GMS figures are as at 1 October each year.

Source:
Department of Health's annual medical and dental and non-medical workforce censuses and bi-annual General Medical Services census.

Hepatitis C

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will require health authorities to provide counselling before and after blood tests for hepatitis C. [3379]

Mr. Boateng: No. In general, patients should be given sufficient information to enable them to make an informed decision before any diagnostic test. For hepatitis C, this would include discussion of the treatment options, the consequences of a positive test and advice about lifestyle. However, when the Chief Medical Officer wrote to all doctors on 3 April 1995 about the "Look Back" exercise to identify those infected with hepatitis C through blood transfusion, the letter specified that counselling should be made available before and after testing for those found to be infected in this way.

Malaria

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many notified malaria cases there have been in each year since the abolition of NHS prescriptions for malaria chemoprophylaxis. [3802]

Ms Jowell: An amendment to the regulations covering the provision of malarial prophylaxis came into force on February 1995 and since then travellers have to pay for their anti-malarial drugs. The number of cases of malaria reported in the United Kingdom for the last 10 years is given in the table. There have been 325 cases of malaria reported to the Malaria Reference Laboratory for the period January to March 1997; this compares to 397 cases reported for the same period in 1996 and 314 in 1995. The number of cases of malaria varies each year and reflects the variations in transmission in the endemic areas as well as the number of people travelling to malarious areas. We will continue to monitor the situation.

Number of cases of malaria reported in the UK to the Malaria Reference Laboratory, 1987–1996:

Year	*Cases of malaria*
1987	1,816
1988	1,674
1989	1,987
1990	2,096
1991	2,332
1992	1,629
1993	1,922
1994	1,887
1995	2,055
1996	2,500

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has evaluated on the change in incidence of the new variant form of CJD. [3835]

Ms Jowell: New variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (nvCJD) came to light in early 1996. Mathematical modelling indicates that it is likely to be three or four years before we can make soundly based predictions of the likely course of the disease.

NHS Staff Contracts

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to abolish confidentiality clauses within NHS staff contracts. [4203]

Mr. Milburn: The matter is currently being considered.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to ensure that hospital trusts send out ethnic monitoring questionnaires with application forms. [4041]

Mr. Milburn: The Department of Health recommends ethnic monitoring of job applicants as good personnel practice in "Ethnic minority staff in the NHS: a programme of action" and in guidance to the NHS on medical appointments. Chairs and Chief Executives of NHS trusts and health authorities are accountable for meeting equal opportunities objectives locally. Postgraduate deans conduct ethnic monitoring of specialist registrar appointments.

The NHS Executive is working with NHS employers, professional bodies and Royal Colleges, education consortia, trade unions, Deans and others to tackle discrimination and encourage adoption of best practice.

Wythenshaw Hospital

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients have been transferred out of Wythenshawe hospital in each month since January 1996 because of a lack of available beds; and what estimate he has made of the cost of *(a)* transferring patients and *(b)* their treatment. [4181]

Mr. Milburn: A patient cannot be admitted to hospital unless a bed is available. The number of Accident and Emergency patients who were transferred to other hospitals as a result of Wythenshawe Hospital being full is set out in the table. Both Withington and Wythenshawe Hospitals are part of South Manchester University Hospitals NHS Trust.

	Withington	*Elsewhere*	*Total*
January 1996	—	9	9
February	2	21	23
March	4	27	31
April	8	31	39
May	2	16	18
June	2	30	32
July	6	33	39
August	16	28	44
September	21	54	75
October	7	32	39
November	9	18	27
December	24	70	94
January 1997	24	32	56
February	26	42	68
March	12	27	39
April	14	37	51
May	18	49	67

Source:
South Manchester University Hospitals NHS Trust.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time persons employed by his Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3 an hour; and what estimate he has made in each case for the national health service generally. [4187]

Ms Jowell: No staff in my Department or its agencies earn less than £3 an hour. Sixty-one full time staff earn up to £3.50 an hour; 47 full time staff and two part time staff, earn between £3.50 and £4 an hour.

For the NHS generally, I refer the right hon. Member to the reply my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry gave the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) on 2 June 1997 at columns *20–21*.

Corticosteroids

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of people who *(a)* have been prescribed and *(b)* took corticosteroids in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [4173]

Mr. Milburn: It is not possible to estimate the number of people prescribed and taking corticosteroids. Thirty-one million prescriptions items for corticosteroids were dispensed in England in 1996.

Racial Discrimination

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he proposes to take to tackle racial discrimination in the health service. [4044]

Mr. Milburn: We are determined to take action to ensure that the Health Service is free from racial discrimination. The NHS Executive has signed up to the Commission for Racial Equality's "Leadership Challenge" as a signal of our commitment in the European Year Against Racism.

The NHS Equal Opportunities Unit is working with NHS employers, professional bodies, the Commission for Racial Equality, trade unions and others to enhance the capacity of the Service to tackle discrimination and encourage adoption of good practice. This work includes supporting NHS trusts and health authorities, whose Chairs and Chief Executives are accountable for meeting the goals of "Ethnic minority staff in the NHS: a programme for action", by promoting and disseminating best practice. Progress towards these goals forms part of the "NHS as a good employer" benchmark set out in the annual Priorities and Planning guidance.

Gyms and Health Centres

Mr. William O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to extend the provisions of access to gyms and health centres on prescription; and if he will make a statement. [4129]

Mr. Milburn: General Practitioner exercise on prescription schemes are being adopted at local level. For the price of a prescription, patients can make use of local health and leisure facilities for a planned programme of appropriate exercise. Some prescription schemes already make use of gyms. Individual local health care teams are best placed to decide which facility would deliver the greatest benefit to the patient. Detailed guidance for primary health care teams is contained in the Health Education Authority's document "Promoting Physical Activity in Primary Care".

NHS Prescriptions

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of people receiving NHS prescriptions who do not follow the full course of treatment. [4284]

Mr. Milburn: In 1996 the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys survey of prescribed medicines in a random sample of 2,082 households found that 8 per cent. could be described as residual or wasted. Within this, 0.7 per cent. were completely unused, 4 per cent. were approximately half used and 3 per cent. were almost gone.

Ophthalmic Service

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of the cost of the ophthalmic service in England and Wales is borne by the users. [4379]

Mr. Milburn: There are no charges for the general ophthalmic services provided under the National Health Service, but only selected groups are eligible for NHS sight tests and spectacle vouchers. We do not have information on the cost of similar services provided privately.

Electricity Transmission Lines

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has commissioned into the health effects of electricity transmission lines on those living in their vicinity. [4281]

Ms Jowell: The Department obtains advice on the health implications of exposure to electromagnetic fields from the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) and other sources including its own funded research. The primary focus of concern has been on power lines and childhood cancer where the results have not shown a proven link: the NRPB's Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation conducted an extensive review of the subject in 1992 and concluded that there was no firm evidence of a carcinogenic hazard from exposure that might be associated with residence near major sources of electricity supply, the use of electrical appliances or work in the electrical, electronic and telecommunication industries. The Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment has endorsed the Advisory Group's report. A supplementary report in 1994 was published by the NRPB to take into account the results of epidemiological studies from Scandinavia, France and Canada. Copies of the Advisory Group's report and the supplementary documents are available in the Library.

Several epidemiological studies are currently under way to investigate childhood cancer in relation to various possible causes including electromagnetic fields. The largest study of this type in this country is the United Kingdom Childhood Cancer Study which is funded in part by the Department of Health with technical support provided by the NRPB. The Department is also funding two pilot studies, one of adults and one of children, looking at cancer incidence near power lines.

Prescription Fraud

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to publish the report of the Efficiency Scrutiny into Prescription Fraud. [4843]

Mr. Milburn: I have now received the report of the "Efficiency Scrutiny into Prescription Fraud". I will be publishing it today, and placing a copy in the Library.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria will be used to determine the health service's strategic need for hospitals to be financed under the private finance initiative. [4060]

Mr. Milburn: The Department of Health will develop its capital investment system so that it will prioritise all major acute sector hospital schemes in accordance with health service needs. This system will apply to both Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and publicly funded procurement options. Proposals for dealing with small-scale acute schemes and non-acute schemes under the PFI will be put forward in the near future.

HIV/AIDS

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what were the numbers of HIV/AIDS sufferers receiving treatment (i) by health board area, (ii) in Wales and (iii) in England; what was the spending per head on treatment and care of HIV/AIDS sufferers in England; if he will give the spending in England and Wales on prevention of HIV/AIDS, in the most recent year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [4214]

Ms Jowell: The total number of HIV positive individuals (including those with AIDS) receiving treatment in 1995 in England was 13,146. In Wales the corresponding total was 197. These data are derived from the National Survey of Prevalent Diagnosed HIV Infections, and record all identified HIV infected patients treated by statutory services during 1995. This is the latest year for which figures are available. The data cover all areas in England but there may be a small element of under reporting. The breakdown of numbers treated in each Regional Office area in England is as follows:

	Number
Northern and Yorkshire	532
Trent	407
Anglia and Oxford	509
North Thames	7,014

	Number
South Thames	2,693
South and West	686
West Midlands	410
North Western	895

The total number for Wales is as follows:

Wales: 197

The total allocation for AIDS treatment and care in England in 1995–96 was £195.1 million. The funds are allocated to health authorities on the basis of the number of AIDS cases reported by the authority to the Public Health Laboratory Service. The funds are directed by health authorities mainly to the statutory health care services, but may also be used to fund a range of other service providers as determined by local needs assessment.

The funds are no longer ringfenced and it is up to health authorities, taking account of local needs assessment and priorities, to determine their local priorities for expenditure. The allocations for AIDS treatment and care in England for 1996–97 totalled £185.7 million, the reduction was because the latest AIDS projections report indicated that the number of people alive with AIDS and severe HIV disease in 1996–97 would be around 10 per cent. lower than previously projected. The allocations for 1997–98 are £199.6 million. This increase represents a contribution towards the costs of new combination therapies. In 1995–96 £49.6 million was allocated to health authorities in England for HIV prevention. These funds continue to be ringfenced, and the corresponding totals for 1996–97 and 1997–98 are £51.3 and £52.3 million respectively. In Wales the majority of expenditure on HIV/AIDS is targeted at preventative measures. The expenditure in 1995–96 totals £2.2 million.

Dental Services

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 10 June, *Official Report*, column *423*, on dental services, if he will list equivalent figures for lapsed dental registration in the three years before the introduction of dental check-up charges, and in each year subsequent to it. [4219]

Mr. Milburn: The adult patient charge for dental examinations was introduced in January 1989. Adults were first registered under the new dental contract in October 1990; the first registration lapses occurred two years later. The number of adult registration lapses for each of the full years 1993–94 to 1996–97 is given in the table.

General dental service: Number of adult registration lapses

England

Year	*Million*
1993–94	4.2
1994–95	4.7
1995–96	4.6
1996–97	4.1

1. The first adult registration lapses occurred in the autumn of 1992, mid-way during the financial year 1992–93. During that part year there were 2.8 million lapses.

2. These figures relate to the number of adult registrations lapsed after a period of two years during which the patient had not attended the dentist. These figures are affected by improvements in the Dental Practice Board procedures for eliminating duplicate registrations.

Proposed NHS Trusts Merger

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to oppose the proposed merger of the Ashford (Middlesex) Hospital and St. Peter's Hospital NHS trusts. [4310]

Mr. Milburn: Any merger proposal will be considered carefully according to its merits and the benefit to patient care.

Norfolk and Norwich Hospital

Mr. Charles Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consultations his Department and the NHS Executive have had about future possible uses of the west Norwich and Stephens sites of the Norfolk and Norwich Healthcare NHS Trust after the new Norfolk and Norwich Hospital has been opened. [4521]

Mr. Milburn: The Department and the Anglia and Oxford Regional Office of the NHS Executive have not had any consultations about future use of the sites of the present Norfolk and Norwich and West Norwich Hospitals and no decisions have yet been taken.

Mr. Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimates his Department has made of the number of car journeys per day by *(a)* staff, *(b)* patients and *(c)* visitors that the new Norfolk and Norwich Hospital is likely to generate. [4522]

Mr. Milburn: A traffic impact assessment (TIA) commissioned by the Norfolk and Norwich Healthcare NHS Trust has identified likely daily flows of traffic to the new hospital as follows:

Staff: 2,666

Patients: 1,486

Service vehicles: 180

Visitors: 1,212.

The TIA made proposals to provide public transport, cycleways and footpaths to the new site which were accepted by the Planning Authorities.

Accident and Emergency Facilities

Mr. Charles Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria his Department currently lays down for health authorities on accessibility to 24-hour accident and emergency facilities in urban areas. [4523]

Mr. Milburn: It is the responsibility of health authorities to decide what facilities are needed in their area, taking account of varying local conditions.

In addition, on 29 October 1996 the NHS Chief Executive wrote to the Chief Executives of all health authorities and NHS trusts reminding them that their first priority was to meet pressures on emergency services. He went on to say that it is a fundamental expectation that accident and emergency departments must not close to emergency admissions. He stressed this point again last week in a speech to the Conference of the Institute of Health Service Managers.

Mr. Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the towns and cities in Britain, with a population greater than 50,000, which currently have no NHS 24-hour accident and emergency service within their boundaries. [4512]

Mr. Milburn: In 1995–96 there were 211 National Health Service trusts, special health authorities and directly managed units with large accident and emergency departments. We do not hold information on which towns and cities have accident and emergency departments within their boundaries.

Source: The NHS Performance Guide 1995–96.

Special Advisers

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will indicate the number of salaries of his Department's special advisers falling within the range of *(a)* £24,349–£29,999, *(b)* £30,000–£34,999, *(c)* £35,000–£39,999, *(d)* £40,000–£44,999, *(e)* £45,000–£49,999, *(f)* £50,000–£54,999, *(g)* £55,000–£59,999, *(h)* £60,000–£64,999, *(i)* £65,000–£69,999 and *(j)* £70,000–£73,484. [4558]

Ms Jowell: Consistently with the practice of the previous administrations and in order to protect the privacy of individuals, only aggregate information on the salaries of special advisers will be published.

Once all salaries have been agreed aggregate information will be published giving the number of advisers paid in £10,000 bands.

Hospital Access

Mr. Charles Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidelines his Department issues to ensure that new hospitals are accessible to patients, visitors and staff by public transport *(a)* with regular frequency, *(b)* for 24-hours a day and *(c)* at a reasonable price. [4520]

Mr. Milburn: The policy on access by public transport is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions which produces guidance for local authorities. It is for the local authorities to interpret the guidance when considering planning applications by National Health Service trusts for new hospital sites.

Guidance issued by NHS Estates, an Agency of the Department of Health, advises NHS bodies to provide facilities in a way which allows them to be accessible to patients and draws to their attention the need to consider access, circulation and vehicle parking, highlighting the need for a good public transport service to meet the needs of staff, patients and visitors, with the aim of reducing demand upon, and the expense of, car parking facilities.

SCOTLAND

Diabetics

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to allow pen needles to be made available on prescription for people with diabetes who require insulin; and if he will make a statement. [4139]

Mr. Galbraith: The Department of Health, on behalf of all the UK Health Departments, evaluates appliances for safety, efficacy and value for money.

The Department of Health is currently considering whether needles for pen injection systems should be prescribable by general practitioners on the National Health Service.

Council of Ministers

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many European Council of Ministers meetings Scottish Environment Ministers have attended since 1992; and if he will make a statement. [4224]

Mr. Chisholm: Scottish Environment Ministers have attended three Environment Councils since 1992. In line with our Manifesto commitment that a Labour Government would mean Scotland's concerns being heard at the heart of Europe, Scottish Ministers work closely with their colleagues to ensure Scotland's interests in European matters are taken fully into account. Their attendance at Council meetings, where matters of interest to Scotland are to be discussed, clearly contributes to the delivery of our commitment.

Control of Pollution Act 1974

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many *(a)* persons and *(b)* organisations have been convicted under sections 31 and 32 of the Control of Pollution Act 1974 in each of the past 10 years; what was the range of fines imposed and the average financial penalty; and if he will make a statement. [4058]

Mr. Chisholm: The information requested is not held centrally and the data could be collated only at a disproportionate cost.

Up to 1995–96 the information requested is within the annual reports of individual river purification boards, which are available in the House Library. However, information on convictions in the former island council areas is not held centrally. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency is presently considering the information which should be contained within its 1996–97 annual report and we will bring this issue to its attention.

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to modify the Control of Pollution Act 1974; and if he will make a statement. [4057]

Mr. Chisholm: There are no present plans to modify the Control of Pollution Act 1974. The Act may however need to be amended in the light of developments in relation to the EC water framework directive currently under negotiation.

Cattle (Computerised Traceability)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the computerised traceability scheme proposed by Mr. Brian Pack of Aberdeen and Northern Marts; and if he will make a statement on the estimated time scale for the introduction of a fully computerised traceability scheme for beef herds in Scotland. [4217]

Mr. Chisholm: Aberdeen and Northern Marts carried out a feasibility study on a computerised tracing system for Scottish cattle in 1994. This voluntary system was considered by the Department, as were contributions from other sources. Circumstances have changed considerably since then. Both the Government and the industry ascribe great importance to the introduction of a mandatory national system. We are proceeding urgently on this basis.

Special Advisers

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will indicate the number of salaries of his Department's special advisers falling within the range of *(a)* £24,349–£29,999, *(b)* £30,000–£34,999, *(c)* £35,000–£39,999, *(d)* £40,000–£44,999, *(e)* £45,000–£49,999, *(f)* £50,000–£54,999, *(g)* £55,000–£59,999, *(h)* £60,000–£64,999, *(i)* £65,000–£69,999 and *(j)* £70,000–£73,484. [4556]

Mr. Dewar: Consistent with the practice of previous administrations and in order to protect the privacy of individuals, only aggregate information on the salaries of special advisers will be published. Once all salaries have been agreed the number of advisers paid in each of the appropriate £10,000 bands will be published.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 20 June 1997

HOME DEPARTMENT

Thomas G. Moringiello

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date Mr. Thomas G. Moringiello (TH 2658) was convicted and of what offence; what sentence he received and on what date he completed his sentence; for what reason he is still being detained; what is the total cost to the taxpayer of his imprisonment; what was the sum of money involved in the offences for which he was convicted; and if he will make a statement. [3516]

Ms Joyce Quin: Mr. Thomas G. Moringiello, who is a citizen of the United States, was convicted at Liverpool Crown Court on 27 June 1996 of 10 charges of fraud and deception involving sums totalling £815.69. He was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment and recommended for deportation. Mr. Moringiello lodged an appeal against conviction and sentence, and this is due to be heard by the Court of Appeal on 26 June. Taking into account remand time, the conditional release date from his sentence was 21 August 1996, but he is now held under the Immigration Act 1971 pending the decision as to whether he should be deported. From the time of his first remand into custody on 1 December 1995 up to the present time, the cost of Mr. Moringiello's imprisonment has been approximately £35,384.

Alcohol (Young People)

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will strengthen the law to prevent the drinking of alcohol by persons under the age of 18 years in public streets. [4182]

Mr. Michael: The Government is determined to tackle the problem of young people and alcohol. We will implement the Confiscation of Alcohol (Young Persons) Act 1997 which will provide the police with the power to confiscate alcohol from those under 18 years of age drinking in a public place.

We have also set up a Ministerial Group to look at the promotion and sale of certain alcoholic drinks to children. We are holding urgent talks with the drinks industry to demand swift action. If we are not satisfied with the response we are prepared to take action ourselves.

Firearms

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list by (1) each police force and (2) each London borough the number of persons shot with illegal firearms in each of the last three years and the current year, indicating *(a)* how many persons were (i) killed and (ii) injured, *(b)* the type of firearm used, *(c)* the calibre of firearm used, *(d)* the number of persons made answerable to the courts in respect of such crimes and *(e)* the number of occasions the police have sent an armed response team to an incident. [4051]

Mr. Michael: In the past, information on whether firearms used in crime are legally held or not or on the calibre of firearms used has not been collected centrally in England and Wales as a matter of routine. However, a special exercise was conducted last year to find out further information on homicides involving firearms. This covered the three years from 1992 to 1994, and out of a total of 196 homicides involving the use of a firearm, information was available in 129 cases to show the weapon was held illegally.

Information on individual London Boroughs is not available centrally, nor is information on incidents where only non-fatal injuries were caused or the use of armed response teams in these incidents. The number of persons prosecuted for the offences is available only at disproportionate cost.

The following table gives the available information by police force area:

Use of illegally held firearms in homicide, by type of firearm and calibre

England and Wales 1992–94

Number of offences

	Type of firearm Handgun										
Police force	9mm	.22	.32	.357	.38	.45	.445	.455	.635	N/K	Total handgun
Avon and Somerset	1	1	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	3
Bedfordshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cambridgeshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cheshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cleveland	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cumbria	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Derbyshire	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Devon and Cornwall	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Dorset	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Durham	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Essex	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Gloucestershire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Greater Manchester	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	1	—	3
Hampshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hertfordshire	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1
Humberside	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Kent	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Lancashire	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1

Use of illegally held firearms in homicide, by type of firearm and calibre

England and Wales 1992–94

Number of offences

Police force	Type of firearm Handgun 9mm	.22	.32	.357	.38	.45	.445	.455	.635	N/K	Total handgun
Leicestershire	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Lincolnshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
London, City of	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Merseyside	1	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1	—	3
Metropolitan Police	5	3	11	1	7	3	1	—	—	2	33
Norfolk	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1
Northamptonshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
North Yorkshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1
Northumbria	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	2
Nottinghamshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
South Yorkshire	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	1
Staffordshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Suffolk	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Surrey	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Sussex	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2
Thames Valley	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Warwickshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
West Mercia	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
West Midlands	1	—	—	—	1	—	—	3	—	1	6
West Yorkshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Wiltshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Dyfed-Powys	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Gwent	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
South Wales	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Dyfed Powys	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
All forces	10	6	13	3	9	6	1	3	2	6	59

Police force	*Type of firearm Shotgun 410*	*12 Bore*	*20 Bore*	*Heavy*	*N/K*	*Total shotgun*
Avon and Somerset	—	—	—	—	—	—
Bedfordshire	—	1	—	—	2	3
Cambridgeshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cheshire	—	2	—	—	—	2
Cleveland	—	4	—	—	—	4
Cumbria	—	—	—	—	—	—
Derbyshire	—	2	—	—	—	2
Devon and Cornwall	—	1	—	—	—	1
Dorset	—	1	—	—	—	1
Durham	1	—	—	—	—	1
Essex	—	—	—	—	—	—
Gloucestershire	—	1	—	—	—	1
Greater Manchester	—	3	—	—	—	3
Hampshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hertfordshire	—	—	—	—	1	1
Humberside	—	2	—	—	—	2
Kent	—	1	—	—	—	1
Lancashire	—	1	—	—	—	1
Leicestershire	—	2	—	—	—	2
Lincolnshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
London, City of	—	—	—	—	—	—
Merseyside	—	2	—	—	—	2
Metropolitan Police	1	7	1	—	—	9
Norfolk	1	—	—	—	2	3
Northamptonshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
North Yorkshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
Northumbria	1	1	—	1	—	3
Nottinghamshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
South Yorkshire	1	1	—	—	1	3
Staffordshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
Suffolk	—	—	—	—	—	—
Surrey	1	—	—	—	—	1
Sussex	—	1	—	—	—	1

Police force	Type of firearm Shotgun 410	12 Bore	20 Bore	Heavy	N/K	Total shotgun
Thames Valley	1	2	—	—	2	5
Warwickshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
West Mercia	—	1	—	—	—	1
West Midlands	—	2	—	—	4	6
West Yorkshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
Wiltshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
Dyfed-Powys	—	—	—	—	—	—
Gwent	—	—	—	—	1	1
South Wales	2	3	—	—	—	5
Dyfed Powys	—	2	—	—	—	2
All forces	9	43	1	1	13	67

Police force	Type of firearm Other[1] .22	.38	Total other	Total of firearms
Avon and Somerset	—	—	—	3
Bedfordshire	—	—	—	3
Cambridgeshire	—	—	—	—
Cheshire	—	—	—	2
Cleveland	—	—	—	4
Cumbria	—	—	—	—
Derbyshire	—	—	—	3
Devon and Cornwall	—	—	—	1
Dorset	—	—	—	1
Durham	—	—	—	1
Essex	—	—	—	—
Gloucestershire	—	—	—	1
Greater Manchester	—	—	—	6
Hampshire	—	—	—	—
Hertfordshire	—	—	—	2
Humberside	—	—	—	2
Kent	—	—	—	1
Lancashire	—	—	—	2
Leicestershire	—	—	—	3
Lincolnshire	—	1	1	1
London, City of	—	—	—	—
Merseyside	—	—	—	5
Metropolitan Police	—	—	—	42
Norfolk	—	—	—	4
Northamptonshire	—	—	—	—
North Yorkshire	—	—	—	1
Northumbria	—	—	—	5
Nottinghamshire	—	—	—	—
South Yorkshire	—	—	—	4
Staffordshire	—	—	—	—
Suffolk	—	—	—	—
Surrey	—	—	—	1
Sussex	—	—	—	3
Thames Valley	—	—	—	5
Warwickshire	—	—	—	—
West Mercia	—	—	—	1
West Midlands	—	—	—	12
West Yorkshire	—	—	—	—
Wiltshire	—	—	—	—
Dyfed-Powys	—	—	—	—
Gwent	2	—	2	3
South Wales	—	—	—	5
Dyfed Powys	—	—	—	2
All forces	2	1	3	129

[1] Rifle, Section 1 (prohibited) firearm.

Public Houses

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if his proposed anti-social neighbours legislation will apply to public houses. [4076]

Mr. Michael: We are working on the details of the Community Safety Order for inclusion in the Crime and Disorder Bill, but I would expect it to be capable of applying to anti-social behaviour arising from an individual's presence in a public house.

Prison Statistics

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment his Department has made of the maximum number of prisoners that can be accommodated at *(a)* Camp Hill, *(b)* Albany and *(c)* Parkhurst prisons on the Isle of Wight; and on what occasions those limits have been exceeded during the past 10 years. [4084]

Ms Joyce Quin: The maximum number of prisoners that can be accommodated at a prison is known as the "operational capacity". This is defined as the certified total number of prisoners that can be held without serious risk to good order, security and the proper running of the planned regime. This number fluctuates, for example as accommodation is brought in and out of use and as assessments are revised by the Area Manager.

As at 18 June, the operational capacity at *(a)* Camp Hill was 531, *(b)* Albany was 436 and *(c)* Parkhurst was 349.

Centrally recorded information on whether operational capacity has been exceeded is available only from 1 January 1996, based on population figures for the last Friday of each month. This indicates that the figure was exceeded at Albany in March 1997 and from November 1996 to January 1997 at Parkhurst.

Electric Shock Devices

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many British companies have been licensed under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1982 to handle, distribute, store and manufacture electric shock devices in each year since 1992; and if he will name them; [3815]

(2) What assessment he has made of procedures which regulate the manufacture, sales, storage and distribution of electric shock devices by United Kingdom companies. [3942]

Mr. Michael: The unauthorised acquisition, purchase, possession, manufacture, sale and transfer of weapons discharging electric shocks are considered to be prohibited under section 5(1)(b) of the Firearms Act 1968.

Applications for authority under section 5 of the 1968 Act are considered by the Home Office, for companies in England and Wales, and by the Scottish Office. Because of the specially dangerous nature of prohibited weapons, applications are subject to rigorous scrutiny. None will be granted unless *(a)* the person or company making it is in all respects fit and proper; *(b)* they will comply with stringent security standards commensurate with the prohibited weapons to be held; and *(c)* there is demonstrable evidence of a genuine and legitimate business or other need for the prohibited weapons in question.

Barcrest Limited were issued with authority under section 5(1)(b) of the 1968 Act on 22 April 1997 to purchase and possess four electric shock weapons to assist their research into preventing these from being used in attacks on gaming machines. This authority is valid for one year only.

No other company has been granted authority under the Firearms Acts in respect of prohibited electric shock weapons since 1992. I consider that these arrangements are effective in restricting trade in electric shock weapons in this country.

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if Air Taser Incorporated, Scottsdale, Arizona is or has been licensed under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1982 to handle, distribute, store or manufacture electric shock devices in the UK. [3945]

Mr. Michael: No authority has been given to this company by the Secretary of State under section 5(1)(b) of the Firearms Act 1968 to possess, purchase, acquire, manufacture, sell or transfer such devices.

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if *(a)* Racing Lines of Darwen, Lancashire, and *(b)* Mark Hilliard of Darwen, Lancashire, are or have been licensed to handle, distribute, store or manufacture electric shock devices in the United Kingdom. [3937]

Mr. Michael: Neither company has been given authority by the Secretary of State under section 5(1)(b) of the Firearms Act 1968 to possess, purchase, acquire, manufacture, sell or transfer such devices.

Prisoners (Illiteracy)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the illiteracy rate among the current prison population. [3790]

Ms Joyce Quin: Prison Service knowledge about literacy rates among prisoners is derived from the results of the basic skills screen test for literacy and numeracy which prisoners may be invited, but are not required, to take. These suggest that, while very few prisoners are actually illiterate, between 40 per cent. and 50 per cent. of those undertaking the test need help to improve their basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Metropolitan Police

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the number of police officers at each Metropolitan police station who have served with the Metropolitan police force for *(a)* up to five years, *(b)* five to 10 years, *(c)* 10 to 20 years and *(d)* 20 years and above; and in each case what is the amount spent on their pay. [3971]

Mr. Michael: The Commissioner has provided the following information.

Division	Up to 5 years service	5 and 10 years	10 to 20 years	20 or more years
1 Area				
Belgravia	83	76	98	55
Brompton	127	102	129	46
Charing Cross	102	114	135	66
Fulham	76	59	57	34
Hammersmith	81	98	117	39
Marylebone	92	93	84	55
Notting Hill	81	71	68	31
Paddington Green	94	107	117	46
West End Central	73	74	106	55
Total	809	794	911	427
2 Area				
Barnet and Hertsmere	41	63	96	81
Ealing	76	83	152	43
Golders Green	57	47	78	33
Hampstead	45	53	70	39
Harrow	46	73	123	40
Holborn	68	46	59	34
Holloway	79	74	80	31
Hornsey	71	69	86	50
Islington	76	105	95	32
Kentish Town	58	81	105	41
Kilburn	72	138	112	51
Southall	61	79	102	49
Tottenham	83	75	90	26
Wembley	69	70	88	42
West Hendon	54	49	96	45
Total	956	1,105	1,432	637
3 Area				
Barkingside	74	52	106	63
Chingford	70	59	64	68
Dagenham	55	73	108	67
Edmonton	69	59	88	47
Enfield	72	67	87	58
Forest Gate	70	90	91	41
Havering	51	63	137	83
Ilford	73	51	84	49
Leyton	69	61	72	35
Limehouse	57	70	93	33
Plaistow	72	87	114	40
Shoreditch and Hackney	74	103	110	49
Stoke Newington	87	100	104	44
Whitechapel	79	99	105	45
Total	972	1,034	1,363	722
4 Area				
Bexleyheath	65	59	91	70
Bromley and Orpington	94	95	169	125
Catford	73	77	85	58
Croydon	64	52	100	69
Epsom and Sutton	83	92	142	95
Greenwich	71	80	83	51
Lewisham	92	71	105	54
Peckham	80	78	112	30
Plumstead	73	64	101	75
South Norwood	81	66	116	67
Southwark	82	92	84	42
Walworth	64	87	71	35
Total	922	913	1,259	771
5 Area				
Battersea	77	83	85	41
Brixton	69	106	110	32
Chiswick	49	52	55	39
Heathrow	4	57	177	141
Hillingdon	107	71	132	101
Hounslow	66	52	98	40
Kingston	83	67	133	80
Spelthorne	44	35	65	53
Streatham	73	69	87	36
Twickenham	69	52	97	66
Vauxhall	96	103	128	50
Wandsworth	81	89	120	52
Wimbledon	99	58	103	59
Total	917	894	1,390	790

The information requested on the amount spent on officers pay is not readily available and could be only obtained at disproportionate costs.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the *(a)* training and *(b)* cost implications of retraining officers moved to new posts as a consequence of the tenure policy to be implemented by the Metropolitan police service. [3969]

Mr. Michael: The Commissioner informs me that there will be no increase in the Metropolitan Police's training budget as a result of the introduction of the new tenure policy. Any additional demands for training will be met within existing budgets. The majority of officers who transfer under the policy will do so to another police station and carry out the same function in a different environment. Those officers will therefore not require additional training.

Prison Service

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the siting of a new prison is an operational matter for the chief executive of the Prison Service. [3787]

Ms Joyce Quin: Yes. A preliminary decision on where to build a new prison is taken following strategic research to determine the geographic area of greatest need. A decision to proceed with a site identified for prison development is then dependent upon widespread public consultation and appropriate planning approval.

Prisoners (Education)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of the Prison Service budget is taken up with educational activities for prisoners; and if he will make a statement. [3789]

Ms Joyce Quin: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) on 19 June, *Official Report*, column *245*.

Young Offenders Institution, Colchester

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list *(a)* the full cost of establishing the young offenders institution at Colchester Military Corrective Training Centre, *(b)* the maximum number of offenders who can be accommodated at any one time, *(c)* the number held there each week since it

opened, *(d)* the number of staff employed, how many are Prison Service and how many military, *(e)* the date when the first offenders were admitted, and *(f)* the estimated annual running cost; and what are the comparative costs for an offender at Colchester and in a more traditional youth offenders institute. [3918]

Ms Joyce Quin: The cost of establishing Colchester young offender institution was approximately £460,000.

There is accommodation available for up to 38 young offenders, although the planned population is 32.

From 20 February the population was 11. It increased to 21 on 4 April and to 29 on 15 May.

Colchester young offender institution has 23 staff. Of these, 13 were appointed from the Military Corrective Training Centre and the others from the Prison Service.

The first young offenders were admitted to Colchester young offender institution on 20 February.

The current estimated running costs for the financial year 1 April 1997 to 31 March 1998 are £1,006,000. These exclude an estimated charge of £114,292 made by the Ministry of Defence for rental of the accommodation and a contribution in lieu of rates.

Based on the figure for running costs given above and a population of 32, the annual cost per place at Colchester will be about £31,500, compared with about £17,500 in a typical young offender institution.

Ethnic Minority Achievement Programme

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the future of the Ethnic Minority Achievement Programme. [4614]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Payment of grant under section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966 to Lancashire County Council in respect of its three Ethnic Minority Achievement Projects to support pupils in schools is due to continue until August 1998. We shall announce as soon as possible our general intentions with regard to such funding for the period after that. We shall shortly be in touch with the relevant authorities about the implications of local government reorganisation which takes effect next April.

Handguns (Olympic Games)

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department under what circumstances a United Kingdom competitor will be able to train and take part in an Olympic Games event held in the United Kingdom which involves the use of a .22 weapon. [4869]

Mr. Michael: If the Firearms (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill is passed, then all small-calibre pistols will become prohibited. It would then no longer be possible to use these weapons for target shooting in Great Britain and training here will cease.

Three of the fifteen shooting events in the Olympic Games, if held in this country, would be affected by the prohibition. Competitors from any participating country could be allowed to take part in those three events by means of special authority being granted by the Secretary of State under the terms of section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968. Such authority would however be limited to the duration of the Games themselves. Unless the British competitors trained for these particular events outside Great Britain, they might be unable to qualify. The remaining twelve shooting events would be unaffected by the change and British competitors can continue to train for them in Great Britain.

Visitors' Visas

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to revise the rules and procedures on visitors' visas. [4805]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 19 May, *Official Report*, column 7.

Custody (Time Limits)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the Government will introduce the 110 day rule applicable in Scots law to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. [2928]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 19 June 1997]:* The 110 day rule under the Scottish system sets custody time limits for indictable cases. Statutory custody time limits have applied also throughout England and Wales since 1991. For cases to be tried on indictment, they are 70 days from first appearance to committal and 110 days from committal to start of trial, although in many cases these limits are not being met. The Government have made a commitment to reduce delays in the criminal justice system and are currently developing a comprehensive strategy, including bringing down remand time to national targets, to achieve that aim. Time limits in Northern Ireland are a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Quota Hopping

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the implications of the OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment for the Government's policy on quota hopping under the common fisheries policy. [3963]

Mr. Morley: The OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment, which is currently being negotiated, should not impact upon the Government's policy on quota hopping. We are not intending to limit foreign investment in the UK fishing industry but will be focusing on ensuring that the activities of UK registered fishing vessels contribute substantial economic benefits to those communities in the UK dependent on fishing and related industries.

Beef

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what volume of beef or beef products consumed in the United Kingdom in 1996 was *(a)* home produced, *(b)* imported from other European Union countries and *(c)* imported from non-European Union countries; and if he will list the volumes from each country. [4651]

Mr. Rooker: Figures for the volume of beef and beef products consumed are not available in the form requested. However, the net supply[1] of beef to the UK market in 1996 was 742 thousand tonnes (dressed carcase weight equivalent) of which 15 per cent. was imported from EU countries and 10 per cent. from non-EU countries. Imports of beef and beef products, as recorded in the Overseas Trade Statistics, are shown in the following tables. Some imports may be destined for re-export rather than for consumption.

Beef and beef product imports from EU countries in 1996[2]

	Consignment weight in tonnes	
	Beef	*Beef products*
Austria	0	9
Belgium—Luxembourg	843	292
Denmark	849	331
Finland	0	0
France	8,091	1,765
Germany	3,551	1,485
Greece	0	57
Irish Republic	36,901	18,402
Italy	179	117
Netherlands	11,007	1,614
Spain	701	179
Sweden	42	0
Total	62,164	24,251

[1] Net supply is UK beef production plus imports less exports of beef and net of stock change of beef. A proportion of this supply will have been processed into beef products, some of which may have been exported rather than consumed in the UK. This supply also excludes the beef component of imported beef products.
[2] All data are provisional and subject to amendment.

Beef and beef product imports from non-EU countries in 1996[2]

	Consignment weight in tonnes	
	Beef	*Beef products*
Argentina	7,455	15,299
Australia	9,221	1,587
Botswana	6,927	419
Brazil	3,809	32,417
Mauritius	0	2,593
Namibia	6,388	0
New Zealand	3,880	1,333
Paraguay	115	0
Romania	0	395
South Africa	1,720	0
Swaziland	561	0
Switzerland	0	536
U.S.A.	2,847	1,146
Uruguay	8,115	4,012
Zimbabwe	5,209	2,091
Other	1,010	337
Total	57,257	62,166

[1] Net supply is UK beef production plus imports less exports of beef and net of stock change of beef. A proportion of this supply will have been processed into beef products, some of which may have been exported rather than consumed in the UK. This supply also excludes the beef component of imported beef products.
[2] All data are provisional and subject to amendment.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what controls exist for the import of beef and beef products from non-European Union countries; and if he will make a statement. [4650]

Mr. Rooker: All fresh meat imported into the UK, whether from other Member States or third countries, must have been produced in accordance with harmonised Community rules laid down in Council Directive 64/433/EEC. In the case of meat products the harmonised rules are laid down in Council Directive 77/99 (as amended).

In addition, the Fresh Meat (Beef Controls) (No. 2) Regulations 1996 prohibit the sale for human consumption all bovine meat derived from bovines which, at the time of slaughter, were more than 30 months old. This measure applies to all bovines slaughtered on or after 29 March 1996, whether in the UK or overseas, other than those registered under the Beef Assurance Scheme and those born, reared and slaughtered in those third countries specifically excluded by the Regulations (listed in the Schedule to the Regulations). This list of countries is confined to those where the Government is satisfied that we can import beef without risk.

Farm Waste

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what guidance he offers to farmers wishing to dispose of *(a)* farm plastics and *(b)* silage wrap. [4653]

Mr. Morley: General guidance is provided to farmers on the disposal of plastics in the MAFF/WOAD "*Codes of Good Agricultural Practice for the Protection of Air and Soil*". More detailed guidance on the disposal of pesticide containers, packaging and other contaminated materials is provided in the MAFF/HSC statutory "*Code of Practice for the Safe Use of Pesticides on Farms and Holdings*". Copies of these documents have been placed in the Library of the House.

MAFF has recently invited bids for a project to develop and test a manual to help farmers minimise waste, including waste plastics arising on-farm.

Radioactive Contamination (English Channel)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the potential contamination of the English Channel and the fish and mammals therein from the discharge of radioactive material into the sea from the Cap de la Hague nuclear power station. [4643]

Mr. Rooker: The Department carries out regular monitoring and assessment of the radioactive contamination of marine foodstuffs and environmental indicator materials within the English Channel.

The results are published annually in the Department's report "Radioactivity in Food and the Environment". The latest report, for 1995, shows that the contamination attributable to the discharges of radioactivity from the Cap de la Hague reprocessing plant are of negligible radiological significance.

Fallen Stock (Disposal)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what guidance he has issued to farmers faced with costs arising from the disposal of fallen stock; [4655]

(2) what assessment he has made of the level of incentives available to encourage farmers to dispose of fallen stock according to best practice; and if he will make a statement. [4656]

Mr. Rooker: Farmers should dispose of all fallen stock in line with applicable legislation and codes of good practice. It is in their own interests to do so.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what is his policy in respect of the disposal of fallen stock by use of ditches and similar locations in the countryside; [4657]

(2) what steps he is taking to discourage the disposal by farmers of fallen stock around the countryside. [4658]

Mr. Rooker: Fallen stock should be disposed of in a way that prevents the spread of disease and does not pollute water. It is an offence under the Animal By-Products Order 1992 (as amended) to leave carcases in ditches or similar locations around the countryside. It is also an offence under the Dogs Act 1906 knowingly to leave carcases unburied at places where dogs can gain access. However, burial is a permitted method of disposal of fallen stock provided that the carcase is buried at sufficient depth to place it beyond the reach of carnivorous animals. Guidance is provided to farmers in the MAFF Code of Good Agricultural Practice for the Protection of Water and burial must be in ground where contamination of water cannot occur.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Royal Ulster Constabulary

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she plans to lay before the House the annual report for 1996 of the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. [5133]

Marjorie Mowlam: Copies of the Chief Constable's Annual Report 1996 have today been placed in the library. It is a general report on the carrying out by the RUC of their functions during 1996 which is submitted to the Police Authority for Northern Ireland and transmitted to me for laying before Parliament in accordance with Section 15 of the Police Act (Northern Ireland) 1970.

Local Authority Services (Tendering)

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has in relation to compulsory competitive tendering for District Council services in Northern Ireland. [5132]

Marjorie Mowlam: The existing legislation in Northern Ireland provides for the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) to certain specified District Council services over a period of time. All but two of these services have already been subjected to CCT; the two remaining services are the Management of Sports and Leisure Facilities and Construction and Maintenance. These were due to be exposed to competition by 1 April 1998. However, in view of the Government's manifesto commitment on CCT, and plans to introduce a "best value" regime, I have decided to extend the existing timetable to 1 November 1998.

This will allow time to take on board any proposals to modify the current CCT regime and to see how the proposals for a best value regime shape up in Great Britain. I am closely monitoring developments in this area in Great Britain with a view to extending the "best value" regime to District Council services in Northern Ireland as soon as practicable.

In the meantime, the existing CCT legislation will continue to govern District Council services. Consequently, in the case of those services which have already been the subject of CCT, Councils will be required to continue to produce annual reports and to meet the financial objectives specified under the legislation and the DOE(NI) will also continue to monitor Councils' performance until the existing contracts end.

Rate Collection Agency

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what performance targets have been set for the Rate Collection Agency in 1997–98. [5243]

Marjorie Mowlam: For 1997–98 the following performance targets have been set for RCA:

Collection and recovery of rates

1. To collect 97 per cent. of the gross domestic collectable rate, (excluding late assessments) by 31 March 1998.

2. To collect 98.55 per cent. of the gross non-domestic collectable rate (excluding late assessments) by 31 March 1998.

3. To achieve a reduction of 5 per cent. in the real value of the unit costs of collecting rates per hereditament over the two year period to 31 March 1998.

4. To generate refunds to 97 per cent. of ratepayers so entitled within 14 days of credits being identified.

Housing benefit administration

5. To process by 31 March 1998, 95 per cent. of applications for the incoming year received from housing benefit recipients before 15 March 1998.

6. To achieve a reduction of 5 per cent. in real value of unit costs of processing housing benefit cases over the two year period to 31 March 1998.

7. To assess 97 per cent. of housing benefit claims free of error.

Prison Service

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to change the manner of response to parliamentary questions concerning the Northern Ireland Prison Service. [5244]

Marjorie Mowlam: In view of the special sensitivity of prisons matters, I have decided that all questions about the Northern Ireland Prison Service will be answered by a Northern Ireland Minister and not by the Chief Executive of the Service. This is no reflection on the Chief Executive nor does it have any implication for the Northern Ireland Prison Service as an agency. However, it recognises particular concerns that Ministers should answer personally on matters relating to imprisonment.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Project Work

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will announce the commencement date for Project Work work placement providers. [4803]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I am today refocusing Project Work to include proper training and effective subsidies to employers to take on the long-term unemployed. This will enable Project Work providers to agree the detail of their contracts, including start dates, with the Employment Service.

All Project Work pilots will in future include, as a standard feature, intensive help with basic skills for those who need it. I am also pleased to announce an increase in the amount of Workstart subsidy available in the Project Work pilot areas. This means that employers in these areas who take on someone out of work for over two years may receive £60 for a recruit aged 18 to 24 and £75 if aged between 25 and 50.

Enhancing the help given by Project Work pilots is an integral part of the Government's drive to tackle long term unemployment. It extends a helping hand to the jobless by introducing intensive literacy and numeracy support within Project Work to those who need it. The strengthened basic skills element will help equip long term unemployed people more effectively for jobs.

Project Work as inherited from the previous Government is far from perfect and is scheduled to last until the end of the financial year. We want to move to the New Deal as soon as possible, with the most effective package to help the young and long term unemployed off welfare and into work or training. The refocusing of Project Work with skills enhancement offers the long term unemployed support in getting a job, while the New Deal is still in the design and planning stages.

We cannot allow the talents and energy of our citizens to go to waste, untapped and untrained in unemployment. It makes both moral and economic sense to offer a chance of a future to those who have almost given up hope.

HEALTH

Royal Bolton Hospital

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients resident at Royal Bolton hospital on 1 June had been forced to remain in hospital for longer than their treatment required because suitable residential or day care support was not available; how many such patients had been resident at the hospital for *(a)* up to one week, *(b)* up to two weeks, *(c)* up to one month, *(d)* up to two months and *(e)* three months or more; and what estimate he has made of the additional financial costs to the NHS of these extended periods of care. [4252]

Mr. Boateng: Effective communication between health and social services staff is crucial for people who need continuing care after a spell in hospital. Wigan and Bolton Health Authority and Bolton Social Services department work closely together to ensure that no patient is subject to unnecessary delay.

Bolton Hospitals NHS Trust do not have an information system which collects data on blocked beds, but a periodic census is completed manually, covering patients aged over 75 years. We understand from the trust that an additional census of these patients was undertaken on 17 June 1997 and the following position was recorded:

Reason	*Number of patients*
Awaiting completion of assessment	9
Awaiting nursing/residential home package	7
Awaiting domiciliary care package	1
Decision on continuing care under review	2
Other reason	1
Total	20

Time delayed	*Number of patients*
Less than one week	13
One–Two weeks	6
Two–Three weeks	1
Total	20

A further six patients aged under 75 years were awaiting a community care package.

The average cost per day for an elderly medical patient in the Bolton Hospitals NHS Trust is £120.

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for the most recent date for which figures are available the number of people in the Bolton Hospitals NHS Trust area awaiting non-emergency treatment *(a)* up to 12 months, *(b)* up to 18 months, *(c)* up to 24 months and *(d)* over 24 months. [4246]

Mr. Milburn: The latest available information gives the position on 31 March 1997. On that date 5,938 patients were waiting for admission to Bolton Hospitals NHS Trust, on either an inpatient or day case basis, of whom 5,918 had been waiting less than 12 months and all of whom had been waiting less than 18 months.

Portsmouth and South-East Hampshire Health Authority

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the £40,000 given in grants to the Portsmouth and South-East Hampshire health authority has been allocated; and to what extent this funding has satisfied the criteria set out in the bid. [4374]

Mr. Milburn: Portsmouth and South East Hampshire Health Authority was awarded £40,000 as extra funding under the NHS dentistry access fund 1996–97. The bid from that health authority met the criteria which were set out in the directions sent to all health authorities.

Dental Services

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of the cost of the dental service in England and Wales is borne by the users. [4380]

Mr. Milburn: The proportion of gross expenditure on general dental services recovered through charges in England and Wales was 29 per cent. in 1996–97.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what sum has been made available from the Department's Access Fund for NHS dentistry services in Cornwall; how this has been allocated; and which of his Department's criteria were met in the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority bid. [4615]

Mr. Milburn: Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority was awarded £40,000 as extra funding under the NHS Dentistry Access Fund 1996–97. The bid from that health authority met the criteria which were set out in the directions sent to all health authorities.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Compensation Recovery Unit

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much was recovered by the Compensation Recovery Unit from personal injury damages in each year since 1989; and how much he estimates will be recovered in the current year. [2557]

Mr. Bradley: Reform of the Compensation Recovery scheme will take place in October 1997. It will make the compensator liable for the repayment of benefits paid as a consequence of accident, injury or disease. Reform will also mean that compensation for pain and suffering will be paid to the victim in full. The administration of the Compensation Recovery Unit is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Andrew Dismore, dated 19 June 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how much was recovered by the Compensation Recovery Unit from personal injury damages in each year since 1989 and how much is estimated to be recovered this financial year.

As the Compensation Recovery scheme applies to compensation payments made on or after 3 September 1990, there were no monies recovered during the 1989–90 financial year. Details of the amounts recovered in each financial year since 1990 are given in the table below:

Financial year	*Amount recovered £ million*
1990–91	3.7
1991–92	25.3
1992–93	51.3
1993–94	81.9
1994–95	110.1
1995–96	135.1
1996–97	145.5

Figures are provisional and subject to change. It is estimated that £179.9 million will be recovered during the current financial year.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Archival Files (Release)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what percentage of and how many archival files which were handed to the Public Record Office in 1965 were released *(a)* in whole and *(b)* in part before 30 years elapsed. [4659]

Mr. Hoon: The Question concerns a specific operational matter on which the Chief Executive of the Public Record Office is best placed to provide an answer and I have accordingly asked the Chief Executive to reply direct.

Letter from Sarah Tyacke to Mr. Norman Baker, dated 19 June 1997:

I have been asked by the Lord Chancellor's Parliamentary Secretary to reply for the Public Record Office to your question about the above.

To produce actual or percentage figures for items from the 47,865 units transferred to the Public Record Office 1965, which were subsequently released in whole or in part before they were 30 years old, could only be done by checking against each individual item its expected and actual release date, and to do so would incur disproportionate cost.

I would be very pleased to invite you to the Public Record Office to see how the system works and to discuss this matter further, if you wished.

CABINET OFFICE

Engagements

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio if he will list his official engagements for the month of July. [4641]

Mr. Mandelson: I expect to have a number of meetings with ministerial colleagues and others.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio (1) if he will list the meetings he has had with persons and organisations external to the Government since taking office; [4660]

(2) if he will list the official engagements he has undertaken on behalf of the Government since taking office. [4642]

Mr. Mandelson: Since taking office I have had a number of meetings with ministerial colleagues and others.

Ministerial Activities

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Minister without Portfolio what responsibilities he has in respect of monitoring and approving the activities of other Government Ministers. [4749]

Mr. Mandelson: My role is to assist my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and ministerial colleagues in implementing Government policy and presenting it effectively.

Press Releases

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio if he will list the press releases he has issued since taking office. [4640]

Mr. Mandelson: On 9 June, I released the text of my speech to the Media Trust. On 18 June, I issued a press notice, announcing the appointment of my Parliamentary Private Secretary.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Social Chapter

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many directives are currently under discussion for implementation under the social chapter; and for how many of these the United Kingdom would hold the right of veto. [4465]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Council of Ministers is currently considering one draft directive under the Agreement on Social Policy (the proposed Burden of Proof Directive). The voting procedure is qualified majority.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Sport (Tobacco Sponsorship)

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what representations he has received from *(a)* sports organisations, *(b)* non-sports organisations and *(c)* individuals relating to his proposal to ban tobacco company sponsorship of sport. [4183]

Mr. Banks: To date I have received 17 representations on the proposed ban on advertising by tobacco companies from organisations and individuals, including from the hon. Member himself; some in favour others against. I am giving them careful consideration.

Chess

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what criteria determine which sports are recognized by the Sports Council; and for what reasons chess is not an approved sport. [4236]

Mr. Banks: The United Kingdom and the Home Country Sports Councils have adopted a system of formal "recognition" of activities, primarily to identify those with which the Councils should be associated for the purposes of providing grant aid and services. The identification of these activities is based on a number of criteria, broadly based on the following principles:

- physical skills;
- physical effort;
- accessibility;
- rules and organisation;
- strategy and tactics;
- essential purpose;
- physical challenge;
- risk;
- "uniqueness";
- level of participation; and
- other issues (eg. political, moral, ethical etc.).

Chess is not a recognised activity because, in the opinion of the United Kingdom and the Home Country Sports Councils, it does not meet a sufficient number of the criteria outlined above, in particular those in respect of physical skills, effort and challenge. These criteria are, however, kept under review and revised from time to time and I am currently studying them very carefully.

Heritage Fund and Millennium Commission Awards

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will publish the total awards made to date by *(a)* the Heritage Fund and *(b)* the Millennium Commission, by administrative counties in England. [4272]

Mr. Tony Banks *[holding answer 19 June 1997]:* The following table shows the number and value of awards made by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Millennium Commission as at 17 June.

County[1]	*Heritage Lottery Fund*		*Millennium Commission*[2]	
	Total number	*Total amount* £	*Total number*	*Total amount* £
Avon	11	2,779,975	1	41,300,000
Bedfordshire	4	302,550	—	—
Berkshire	2	3,865,525	3	2,368,000
Buckinghamshire	5	575,450	1	126,000
Cambridgeshire	23	25,529,079	4	6,245,913
Cheshire	8	1,875,150	—	—
Cleveland	4	1,942,000	1	860,000
Cornwall	17	3,336,660	3	39,863,000
Cumbria	15	3,700,959	3	7,596,393
Derbyshire	10	3,729,725	—	—
Devon	19	7,328,200	—	—
Dorset	18	6,694,900	—	—
Durham	9	943,655	3	17,532,504
East Sussex	10	2,008,100	—	—
Essex	10	789,745	2	598,570
Gloucestershire	14	5,551,260	1	3,060,195
Greater London	125	202,972,610	7	105,143,718
Greater Manchester	26	54,817,325	3	28,081,702
Hampshire	21	14,146,496	1	40,000,000
Hereford and Worcester	11	2,713,400	—	—
Hertfordshire	7	14,965,625	—	—
Humberside	12	1,016,400	1	462,000
Isle of Wight	1	30,000	1	2,169,350
Kent	23	6,103,567	1	329,800
Lancashire	20	5,115,324	3	6,115,549
Leicestershire	9	407,150	1	23,250,000
Lincolnshire	15	644,849	—	—
Merseyside	10	12,516,500	4	30,389,695
Norfolk	16	5,775,623	3	31,589,000
North Yorkshire	25	3,991,322	1	313,750
Northamptonshire	8	2,005,930	1	736,000
Northumberland	8	282,200	1	207,000
Nottinghamshire	9	14,841,644	1	243,600
Oxfordshire	7	4,492,186	1	142,500
Shropshire	8	2,952,396	1	162,500
Somerset	15	1,967,250	—	—
South Yorkshire	7	2,660,047	1	50,000,000
Staffordshire	15	823,875	1	1,599,000
Suffolk	21	2,963,101	1	167,890
Surrey	10	1,652,732	3	485,000
Tyne and Wear	15	19,457,820	1	27,000,000
Warwickshire	2	198,300	—	—
West Midlands	18	16,850,550	3	57,555,540
West Sussex	8	500,170	1	29,897,500
West Yorkshire	28	19,829,791	2	1,365,000
Wiltshire	12	34,630,485	—	—
Grand total	691	522,378,101	66	556,956,669

[1] The table shows the position at 17 June for capital projects by administrative county. In some places, former Metropolitan Counties are used as there is no county-level administrative unit. It is not possible at present to relate awards to the new unitary authorities.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Road Traffic Reduction

Ms Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on how the Road Traffic Reduction Act 1997 is to be implemented by local authorities, with particular reference to its financial implications. [4237]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government is considering at present the arrangements for implementing the Road Traffic Reduction Act. The Act provides for Ministers to issue guidance to local authorities on meeting its provisions. We envisage that this guidance will be issued in draft later this year to allow relevant bodies to comment. Amongst other issues, it is likely to address the financial implications for local authorities.

Trains (Slam Doors)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by train operating company the number of rolling stock units with slam doors in operation and the target dates for their replacement. [4446]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Slam-door trains in use at present, and current plans for their removal by 2000, are as follows:

Operator	*Number in service now*	*Number expected to be in service in 2000*
Scotrail	200	0
North London Railways	26	0
Regional Railways North East	63	0
North West Trains	110	0
South Wales and West	8	0
South West Trains	476	340
Connex South Eastern	720	400
Connex South Central	600	600
Total	2,203	1,340

It is likely that all such units will be phased out by about 2007 at the latest.

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Computer System

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to ensure that the computer system operating the Driver and Vehicle Licensing System will not be affected by the millennium problem. [4449]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency has reviewed all its computer systems. Those which would have been affected by the millennium problem are being upgraded or replaced. The programme of work is expected to be completed by the end of 1998.

Air Services

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the average length of time taken from push back to becoming airborne at Gatwick and Heathrow airports in 1986 and 1996. [4469]

Ms Glenda Jackson: National Air Traffic Services report that, based on 214,309 departures during 1996, the average length of time taken at Heathrow from push back to becoming airborne was 16.9 minutes. At Gatwick, based on a sample of 3,717 departures between April and September 1996, the average length of time taken was 15.0 minutes. The information requested in respect of 1986 is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact on airlines of congestion at Heathrow and Gatwick airports. [4468]

Ms Jackson: I have made no assessment. However, the impact of congestion on airlines operating at Heathrow and Gatwick is limited, as the total number of slots allocated is tightly controlled by National Air Traffic Services through the capacity determination process. The airlines are consulted on the necessary trade-off between any change in the total number of slots to be allocated and the consequences for the average delay the airlines can expect to experience.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many applications for slots at Gatwick and Heathrow airports could not be accommodated in 1996. [4472]

Ms Jackson: Airport Co-ordination Limited is responsible for the allocation of slots at UK airports co-ordinated under EC Regulation 95/93. ACL inform me that at the two allocation rounds during 1996, covering the Winter 1996–97 and Summer 1997 seasons, the total of slot requests which could not be accommodated was 73,805 at Heathrow, and 46,547 at Gatwick.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the average length of airborne holding prior to touch down was at Heathrow and Gatwick airports in 1986 and 1996. [4470]

Ms Jackson: In 1996 the average airborne holding times for Heathrow and Gatwick airports were 3 minutes 9 seconds and 55 seconds respectively. Data for 1986 can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the average number of passengers per air transport movement at Heathrow and Gatwick in *(a)* 1986, *(b)* 1991 and *(c)* 1996; and what projections he has made for (i) 2001 and (ii) 2006. [4398]

Ms Jackson: The information for past years is as follows:

Average number of passengers per air transport movement, 1986, 1991 and 1996

	1986	1991	1996
Heathrow	107	111	130
Gatwick	103	115	114

My Department does not produce forecasts of average passenger numbers per aircraft for future years.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the average number of passengers per air transport movement at *(a)* Stansted, *(b)* Aberdeen, *(c)* Edinburgh, *(d)* Glasgow and *(e)* Southampton in (i) 1986, (ii) 1991 and (iii) 1996; and what projections he has made for (i) 2001 and (ii) 2006. [4399]

Ms Jackson: The information for past years is as follows:

Average number of passengers per air transport movement, 1986, 1991 and 1996

	1986	1991	1996
Stansted	33	47	67
Aberdeen	22	23	29
Edinburgh	45	47	55
Glasgow	55	58	72
Southampton	21	22	23

My Department does not produce forecasts of average passenger numbers per aircraft.

Rail Safety

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by train operating company the number of accidents occurring on rolling stock operated by that company since privatisation. [4447]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This information is not available in the form requested. Accidents may be reported to the Health and Safety Executive either by the train operating company or by Railtrack Plc (in which case it is not always possible to identify on whose rolling stock the accidents have occurred). In addition, separate statistics showing accidents happening after the operative date for each franchise are not readily available.

Rail Services

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by train operating company the number of occasions and the details of warnings issued by *(a)* OPRAF and *(b)* the Rail Regulator for not operating services to the levels specified in the passenger service requirement. [4445]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Franchising Director has proposed one draft enforcement order against a train operating company for a breach of the cancellation levels in the franchise agreement. The draft order published on 14 March against South West Trains, for poor performance in February and March, was withdrawn on 8 May following significant improvements in performance.

The Franchising Director issued a notice on 18 June about a breach by Island Line of its cancellation levels in March 1997. There will be no further action as the company is taking all necessary steps to secure future compliance.

The Rail Regulator is not responsible for enforcing compliance with passenger service requirements.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list by regional rail users committee the number of passenger complaints received for the last 12 months; [4510]

(2) if he will list by regional rail users committee the number of complaints relating to (i) punctuality, (ii) ticketing and (iii) other issues received over the last 12 months. [4511]

Ms Jackson: The most recent 12-month period for which details are available is the financial year 1996–97. The figures are as follows:

Public complaints received by the rail users' consultative committees and by the london regional passengers' committee

1 April 1996 auntil 31 march 1997

Committee	Punctuality	Fares and tickets[1]	Other complaints	Annual total
LRPC	288	208	1,881	2,377
RUCC for southern England	99	29	896	1,024
RUCC for western England	321	80	1,011	1,412
RUCC for Wales	194	39	829	1,062
RUCC for the Midlands	155	18	314	487
RUCC for eastern England	77	54	538	669
RUCC for north eastern England	105	33	659	797
RUCC for north western England	272	86	1,116	1,474
RUCC for Scotland	42	24	385	451
National total	1,553	571	7,629	9,753

[1]Fares and tickets category includes ticket pricing levels and structure; Railcards, Railrover tickets and promotional offers; permited routes; acceptance of through tickets; and predatory fares/exclusionary behaviour.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by the train operating company the number of occasions recorded by OPRAF of that company operating trains with fewer carriages than specified in the passenger service requirement. [4444]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This information is not available in the form requested. A train is "short formed" if it operates with fewer seats than planned, whether or not the number of seats is specified in the passenger service requirement. Under their franchise agreements, operators face a penalty payment for every train short formed. Furthermore, a high level of short formations is liable to result in breach of the franchise agreement and enforcement action by the Franchising Director. There have been no material breaches of franchise agreements as a result of short formations; the performance payments of each operator will be published in the Franchising Director's annual report in the next few weeks.

Vehicle Safety

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to encourage vehicle manufacturers to improve the design of their vehicles following the publication of the EURONCAP crash test results. [4450]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Manufacturers are involved in the EURONCAP testing and evaluation programme and I am keen that they use the results in developing future models. I also hope that the publication of the results of the second series of tests on 13 family-sized saloons on 1 July 1997 will create consumer pressure for improved designs; that has been the experience in the United States and Australia, where similar programmes have been operating for some years.

Mixed Oxide Nuclear Fuels

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) of 10 June, *Official Report*, column *409*, if he will set out the basis for the statement that in the event of an aircraft accident mixed oxide nuclear fuel poses no significant risk to public health. [4375]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My statement was based upon the conclusions of the Advisory Committee on the Transport of Radioactive Materials (ACTRAM) an independent body charged with advising the Secretary of State for Transport and the Chairman of the Health and Safety Commission on major issues related to the transport of radioactive material and on the robustness of the containers used.

In its report, The Transport of Civil Plutonium by Air, published in 1988, ACTRAM concluded: (14.2)

"The health risk to people from the current transport of civil plutonium by air to and from the UK is [also] extremely remote and acceptable."

Bearing in mind that the major hazard of plutonium is one of inhalation, its comments specifically on Mox fuel are particularly relevant: (14.3)

"Plutonium dioxide mixed with Uranium dioxide in the form of ceramic pellets constitutes no significant inhalation hazard."

A copy of ACTRAM's report is available in the Library.

Trees

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of trees planted by the Highways Agency *(a)* are red-leaved and *(b)* have leaves which turn red in the Autumn; and what plans he has to increase that percentage. [4313]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highway Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mrs. Theresa May, dated 20 June 1997:

The Deputy Prime Minister has asked me to reply to your recent question asking what percentage of trees planted by the Highways Agency are red-leaved or have leaves which turn red in the Autumn; and what plans he has to increase that percentage.

Unfortunately it is not possible to quantify this information. Most trees planted by the Highways Agency are native deciduous and although there are no red-leaved native trees, those such as the Wayfaring Tree can give a dense red colour in the Autumn. In general Autumn colour varies with species, soil and weather, and adds interest to tree planting's important role of helping to fit roads into their surroundings. There are no plans to change the current practice.

Seatbelts

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to extend the MOT test to include checks on the operation of seatbelts. [4451]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Mandatory seatbelts are already checked in MOT tests to ensure that they latch and unlatch correctly. The condition of the webbing, anchorage and retractor mechanism is also checked for deterioration. However, there is no check on the restraining operation of seat belts. It would be very difficult to devise a meaningful and reproducible test which could be carried out in 18,000 MOT testing stations across the country and we are aware of no evidence that seat belts fail to operate properly in practice.

Out-of-town Developments

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to change the guidance to planning inspectors on granting permission to out-of-town or edge-of-town shopping centres. [3824]

Mr. Raynsford: Guidance is contained in PPG6: Town Centres and Retail Developments. It clarifies that the key tests that should be applied to assessing proposals for new retail development are the application of the sequential approach to site selection, the impact on the development plan strategy, the vitality and viability of existing centres, accessibility by a choice of means of transport particularly public transport, impact on overall travel and car use and other environmental impacts. We have no current plans to change it.

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what date the review of Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council will be published by the Local Government Commission for England. [4046]

Mr. Raynsford: The Commission have been directed to prepare the Final Report by 25 November 1997. A report containing their draft recommendations is to be published on 1 July 1997.

Dog Fouling Fines

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will assess the advantage of allowing local authorities to use for enforcement purposes the revenue from fines levied under dog fouling legislation. [4027]

Angela Eagle: We believe that local authorities prosecuting criminal cases should have no pecuniary interest in them. A local authority does not receive the fine imposed by a Court on an offender in cases under

dog fouling byelaws or the Dogs (Fouling of Land) Act 1996. It follows that the local authority should not keep the income from any fixed penalty notices which it issues for offences under the 1996 Act.

Pedestrianisation (London)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the pedestrianisation of sections of London; and if he will make a statement. [3665]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 18 June 1997]:* My Department has not traditionally commissioned studies into pedestrianisation schemes. In London this has been a matter for Boroughs to take forward as the local transport authority. However, the Traffic Director for London may, where appropriate, liaise with Boroughs in assessing the impact on traffic of specific schemes. We will shortly be consulting on our plans for a new strategic authority for London which would have transport responsibilities.

My Department, in association with the Department of National Heritage, English Heritage and London Transport, has contributed to the "World Squares for All" study led by Westminster City Council, tasked with developing a masterplan for the Whitehall Conservation Area. This may include elements of pedestrianisation. Proposals will be published for public consultation in September.

Single Regeneration Budget

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to invite further bids under the single regeneration budget; and what funds will be available in *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–00 and *(c)* 2000–01. [4804]

Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning announced on 22 May, *Official Report*, columns *152–53*, that the Government would continue with Round 4 of the Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund, altered to take account of our policy priorities. Bids have been invited by 26 September 1997. On current expenditure plans, total provision nationally for the SRB Challenge Fund of £568 million in 1998–99 and £625 million in 1999–00 includes £12.5 million in 1998–99 and £75 million in 1999–00 for new schemes approved under the current bidding round. The level of resources available for new schemes in each Government Office region will depend on the levels of commitments in each region from the three previous Challenge Fund rounds. Expenditure plans have not yet been set for the year 2000–01. No decisions have yet been taken on whether to have further bidding rounds after Round 4.

Driving Bans

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the five most common primary reasons for driving bans for a period of *(a)* one year or under, *(b)* one to two years, *(c)* two to three years, *(d)* over three years and *(e)* life; and if he will make a statement; [3663]

(2) how many and what percentage of drivers are currently banned from driving for a period of *(a)* one year or under, *(b)* one to two years, *(c)* two to three years, *(d)* over three years and *(e)* life; and if he will make a statement. [3662]

Mr. Michael *[holding answers 18 June 1997]:* I have been asked to reply.

Figures on the number of drivers currently disqualified from driving could be made available only at disproportionate cost.

The number of disqualifications imposed by the courts by period of disqualification and by offence group is published annually in "Offences relating to motor vehicles England and Wales, Supplementary tables" (tables 13 and 14).

Copies of these publications are in the Library.

SCOTLAND

HIV-AIDS

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to match for Scotland the increase in funding for HIV-AIDS treatment in 1997–98 made by the Department of Health in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [4213]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 19 June 1997]:* Health Boards were advised in March this year of the funds earmarked for the treatment and care of HIV-AIDS patients in their areas in 1997–98. It is open to individual boards to augment these resources from their general allocations in the light of local circumstances. I am currently assessing whether further action is appropriate.

Ms Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what were the number of HIV-AIDS sufferers receiving treatment (i) by health board area and (ii) in Scotland as a whole; what was the spending per head on treatment and care of HIV-AIDS sufferers (i) by health board area and (ii) in Scotland as a whole, in the most recent year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [4215]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 14 June 1997]:* Around 1,000 people in Scotland are estimated to be receiving treatment for HIV infection or AIDS. Of this total, some 870 are being treated within the Lothian, Greater Glasgow, Tayside and Grampian Health Board areas. In the current financial year, £9.6 million has been allocated by way of funds earmarked for HIV-AIDS treatment and care. On that basis, expenditure per patient would amount to around £9,600. But that figure does not take into account any additional resources which individual boards may commit from their general allocations.

Home Energy Efficiency Grants

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the total value of and how many home energy efficiency grants were paid to residents in *(a)* the Highlands and Islands and *(b)* Scotland as a whole, in 1996–97. [3798]

Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested is as follows:

	Number of grants	*Total value £*
Scotland	38,135	5,754,000
Highlands and Islands	3,085	512,000

Because of the way scheme data are collected, the Highlands and Islands information does not include figures for the Argyll and Bute area, which incorporates Inverclyde, Dumbarton, Renfrew and parts of west Glasgow. 3,774 grants were paid in this area, with a total value of £531,570.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Environmental Taxes

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on use of environmental taxes to encourage industry to be more competitive. [3022]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply.

It would not be appropriate to comment in the run-up to the Budget.

TREASURY

Bank of England

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he intends to bring forward the proposed Bill to give the Bank of England operational responsibility for setting interest rates. [2088]

Mrs. Liddell: The Bank of England Bill will be introduced after the summer Recess.

Ways and Means Advance

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the prohibition of overdraft facilities with the Bank of England in article 104 in the Maastricht treaty will come into effect. [1447]

Mrs. Liddell: In accordance with Article 109e(3), Article 104 took effect at the start of the second stage of Economic and Monetary Union on 1 January 1994.

However, paragraph 11 of Protocol 11 to the EC Treaty states that "the United Kingdom may maintain its 'ways and means' facility with the Bank of England if and so long as the United Kingdom does not move to the third stage [of Economic and Monetary Union]".

Mr. Heald: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the outstanding ways and means advance from the Issue Department at the Bank of England to the National Loans Fund at the end of the current financial year. [3561]

Mrs. Liddell: Outstanding ways and means advances from Issue Department at the Bank of England to the National Loans Fund at the end of 1996–97 were £14,322 million. Whilst current Government policy is to keep the stock of short-term financing (both the ways and means advance and Treasury bills) roughly constant from year-to-year, its composition depends on fluctuations in the month-to-month pattern of factors affecting the liquidity position of the banking system, including the note issue and net government receipts or payments. As these can be large and unpredictable, it is difficult to give a meaningful forecast of the ways and means advance for the end of this financial year.

Special Advisers

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in what capacity his special advisers are employed in his private office. [3243]

Mrs. Liddell: Four paid Special Advisers have been appointed in the following capacities:

Ed Balls: Economic Adviser to the Chancellor

Charlie Whelan: Press Adviser to the Chancellor

Edward Miliband: Special Adviser to the Chief Secretary

Andrew Maugham: Special Adviser to the Chief Secretary

Corporation Tax

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his assessment of the effects on business investment decisions of *(a)* a classical system and *(b)* an imputations system of corporation tax. [3368]

Dawn Primarolo: Any assessment of the effects on business investment decisions of a classical or an imputation system of corporation tax is dependent on the specific features of that system and the tax rates adopted.

Departmental Appointment

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the nature of the appointment of Ms Sue Nye to the Treasury. [3360]

Mrs. Liddell: Ms Sue Nye has been appointed personally by the Chancellor as his Political Secretary. She is not an employee of the Treasury and receives no remuneration or reimbursement of expenses from public funds.

VAT

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of VAT was paid by businesses and is recoverable as a business cost in each of the last three years. [3446]

Dawn Primarolo: The approximate proportion of total VAT paid which was paid by businesses and recoverable as a business cost in each of the last three years was as follows:

1994–95: 78 per cent.

1995–96: 79 per cent.

1996–97: 78 per cent.

VAT is paid and recovered at each stage in the process of production and distribution of goods and services by taxable persons.

Oil Tax

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was in each of the last five financial years the amount of tax revenue received per barrel of oil produced. [3378]

Dawn Primarolo: North Sea oil tax revenues received per barrel of oil produced in the same financial year, including revenues from gas production converted into equivalent amounts of oil, are in the table below.

	Tax[1] revenue per barrel £
1992–93	1.20
1993–94	1.00
1994–95	1.20
1995–96	1.70
1996–97[2]	2.30

[1] Petroleum revenue tax, corporation tax, and royalty.
[2] Provisional.

Taxpayers

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his current estimate of the outstanding amount of money owed by the Inland Revenue to taxpayers which has not been claimed by them. [3533]

Dawn Primarolo: No estimate has been made. There are many circumstances in which taxpayers and others may be able to claim money from the Inland Revenue, and tax offices will often be aware of a particular case only when a claim is received.

Internet

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has for taxing usage of the Internet. [3325]

Dawn Primarolo: Access to the Internet has always been subject to value added tax. Following a derogation from the Sixth VAT Directive to all member states agreed by the Council of Ministers on 17 March, legislation will be introduced in the UK with effect from 1 July 1997. The legislation, which covers a range of telecommunication services including Internet access, changes the rules governing where, for VAT purposes, the supply takes place. This will ensure fairer taxation where these services are supplied from one country to another. Further information on these changes is available in an Information Sheet issued by Customs and Excise titled VAT Information Sheet 2/97.

Income Tax

Mr. Prior: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the top rate of income tax on earned income in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* Germany, *(c)* France, *(d)* the USA and *(e)* Japan; and at which income level it applies. [3527]

Dawn Primarolo: The information for tax regimes in force at the beginning of 1997 is given in the table. The income figures relate to earned income of single taxpayers and have been converted to pounds sterling using 1996 OECD purchasing power parities.

	Top rate of central government income tax Per cent	*Taxable income level above which top rate applies* £
United Kingdom	40	29,265
Germany[1]	53	39,350
France[2]	54	29,330
USA[3]	39.6	182,150
Japan[4]	50	117,200

[1] Excluding solidarity surcharge (7.5 per cent. of tax) and church tax (9 per cent. tax). At incomes below the level shown rates rise gradually according to a complex formula.
[2] There are also 48 per cent. and 43 per cent. tax bands which start at £23,790 and £14,620 respectively.
[3] States and local governments also impose income tax. OECD use a typical level of 7.25 per cent. Federal income tax at 36 per cent. starts at £83,760 and 31 per cent. tax at £40,150.
[4] Local inhabitant taxes are also charged, at 15 per cent. on incomes over £26,650. Central government tax at 40 per cent. starts at £70,330 and 30 per cent. rates begins at £35,160.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how he intends to monitor the implementation of self-assessment of individuals' liability for income tax; and if he will make a statement. [3547]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue has in place a number of management information systems to monitor the implementation of self assessment. As the Minister responsible for Self Assessment I also receive a monthly progress report.

Tax System

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans the Treasury has to reform the schedular arrangements of the United Kingdom tax system. [3521]

Dawn Primarolo: The way in which different types of income are classified for tax purposes will be considered as part of the Inland Revenue project to rewrite direct tax law so that it is clearer and easier to use.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the first draft of re-written and simplified tax legislation will be published. [3619]

Dawn Primarolo: On present plans, we hope to publish the first draft re-written legislation for consultation next month.

Pensions (Tax Relief)

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to reduce tax relief on pension contributions; and if he will make a statement. [3331]

Dawn Primarolo: It would not be appropriate to comment on any possible tax changes during the run-up to the Budget.

Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee

Ms Kelly: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if non-voting members of the Bank of England's monetary policy committee are entitled to take part in the deliberations of the committee; and if their comments will be minuted; [4576]

(2) how many non-voting members are permitted to attend the Bank of England's monetary policy committee; and what criteria are used in selecting those non-voting members. [4580]

Mrs. Liddell: The Treasury representative is the only non-voting member of the monetary policy committee. The Treasury representative can take part in the discussion, but not in the decision, on interest rates. As is the case with other members, comments made by the Treasury representative will be reflected but not attributed in the minutes.

Ms Kelly: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what priority the Bank of England's monetary policy committee is expected to give to imbalances between the demand and output of *(a)* different industries, *(b)* different sectors and *(c)* different regions of the economy in making its decisions on interest rates. [4637]

Mrs. Liddell: The Chancellor has made it clear that the monetary policy committee will be responsible for taking full account of regional and sectoral information in its monetary policy decisions. The Bank's Court will have particular regard to whether the Bank is collecting such information, and the Court will itself be reformed so that it is representative of the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mortgage Interest Tax Relief

Mr. Norman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are his Department's estimates of the income distribution of taxpayers benefiting from mortgage interest relief. [3708]

Dawn Primarolo: Information for 1997–98 is given in the table. The estimates are based on information projected from the 1994–95 Family Expenditure Survey and are therefore provisional.

Number of beneficiaries of mortgage interest relief by range of total income

Range of total income (lower limit)[1] £	*Number of single people or married couples benefiting from mortgage interest relief thousands*
0	960
5,000	1,070
10,000	1,930
15,000	2,240
20,000	1,680
25,000	1,090
30,000	970
40,000	760
Total	10,700

[1] Total income of husband for married couples.

Low Pay

Ms Kelly: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of people in the constituency of Bolton, West who currently earn less than *(a)* £2.50, *(b)* £3, *(c)* £3.50 and *(d)* £4 per hour. [4247]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Ms Ruth Kelly, dated 20 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on earnings in the Bolton West parliamentary constituency.

The latest available information, from the New Earnings Survey (NES) April 1996, is given in the table below.

Employees on adult rates whose pay for the survey pay-period was not affected by absence, NES April 1996

Percentage of employees with hourly earnings (excluding overtime) less than:

	£2.50	*£3.00*	*£3.50*	*£4.00*
Bolton West				
Full-time	1.0	2.0	4.0	15.2
Part-time	3.6	3.6	17.9	42.9
All	1.6	2.4	7.1	21.3

Unemployment

Ms Kelly: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many persons aged 18 to 24 years in Bolton, West are currently registered unemployed; [4250]

(2) how many persons in Bolton, West aged 18 to 24 years are currently seeking and available for work; [4248]

(3) how many persons aged 18 to 24 years in Bolton, West who are currently registered unemployed have never been employed. [4249]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Ms Ruth Kelly, dated 20 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent questions (4250,4248 and 4249) on unemployment of 18 to 24 year olds in Bolton West.

The measure of unemployment, derived from the quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS), is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and counts as unemployed people who are: a) without a paid job; b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained. However, largely because it is a sample survey, information is not available from the LFS in as much geographical detail as from the claimant count measure described below.

ONS also publishes the monthly claimant count, which is based on the administrative system and includes all people claiming unemployment-related benefits (i.e. Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support or National Insurance credits) at Employment Service offices on the day of the monthly count, who on that day had signed on as unemployed and available to do any suitable work. Essentially, all people who attend an Employment Service office to sign are counted, irrespective of whether they are actually receiving benefit.

Both measures are described and compared in the ONS booklet *How Exactly is Unemployment Measured?*, a copy of which is enclosed.

In April 1997, on the unadjusted basis there were 329 18 to 24 years olds unemployed claimants in the Bolton West parliamentary constituency. The group you refer to in your second question "currently seeking and available for work" is broadly the same as the ILO definition of unemployment except that this also includes those who are waiting to start a job they have already obtained.

However this information is not available at Parliamentary Constituency level. The lowest level at which any LFS data is available is Local Authority District.

No information is available from the claimant count about those who are currently seeking and available for work or those registered unemployed who have never been employed. Information about those ILO unemployed who have never been employed is available from the LFS, but not below county level.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* males and *(b)* females have been unemployed in Southport for more than (i) six months, (ii) 12 months and (iii) 24 months. [4019]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Ronnie Fearn, dated 20 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on unemployment in Southport by duration.

The measure of unemployment, derived from the quarterly Labour Force Survey, is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and counts as unemployed people who are: a) without a paid job; b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained. However, largely because it is a sample survey, information is not available from the LFS in as much geographical detail as from the claimant count measure described below.

ONS also publishes the monthly claimant count, which is based on the administrative system and includes all people claiming unemployment-related benefits (i.e. Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support or National Insurance credits) at Employment Service offices on the day of the monthly count, who on that day had signed on as unemployed and available to do any suitable work. Essentially, all people who attend an Employment Service office to sign are counted, irrespective of whether they are actually receiving benefit.

The information you have requested is only available for claimant unemployment and is given in the attached table.

Unadjusted claimant unemployment by duration in the Southport parliamentary constituency , April 1997[1]

	Males	*Females*
Duration		
Over 6 months	1,019	307
Over 12 months	676	186
Over 24 months	364	90

[1] Unemployment figures by duration are produced quarterly

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* male and *(b)* female 18 to 25-year-olds are currently unemployed in Southport. [4020]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Ronnie Fearn, dated 20 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on unemployment in Southport.

The measure of unemployment, derived from the quarterly Labour Force Survey, is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and counts as unemployed people who are: a) without a paid job; b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained. However, largely because it is a sample survey, information is not available from the LFS in as much geographical detail as from the claimant count measure described below.

ONS also publishes the monthly claimant count, which is based on the administrative system and includes all people claiming unemployment-related benefits (i.e. Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support or National Insurance credits) at Employment Service offices on the day of the monthly count, who on that day had signed on as unemployed and available to do any suitable work. Essentially, all people who attend an Employment Service office to sign are counted, irrespective of whether they are actually receiving benefit.

The information requested can only be derived from the claimant count. In April 1997, the latest date for which figures are available, there were 417 males and 148 females aged 18 to 24 years who were claimant unemployed in Southport.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the levels and rates of unemployment were in each constituency in *(a)* April and *(b)* May. [4144]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mrs. Cheryl Gillan, dated 20 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on the levels of unemployment in each constituency.

The measure of unemployment, derived from the quarterly Labour Force Survey, is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and counts as unemployed people who are: (a) without a paid job; (b) available to start work within the next two weeks and (c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained. However, largely because it is a sample survey, information is not available from the LFS in as much geographical detail as from the claimant count measure described below.

ONS also publishes the monthly claimant count, which is based on the administrative system and includes all people claiming unemployment-related benefits (i.e. Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support or National Insurance credits) at Employment Service offices on the day of the monthly count, who on that day had signed on as unemployed and available to do any suitable work. Essentially, all people who attend an Employment Service office to sign are counted, irrespective of whether they are actually receiving benefit.

Claimant unemployment rates are not available for parliamentary constituencies. The only information for parliamentary constituencies is the unadjusted level of claimant unemployment, which is accessible from the Nomis database in the House of Commons Library.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 23 June 1997

TREASURY

Gross Domestic Product

Mr. Townend: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the Government's long-term targets for the percentage of Gross Domestic Product which public expenditure constitutes. [3355]

Mr. Darling: The Government is currently undertaking a comprehensive review of public expenditure and will determine its plans in the light of the findings and the prospects for the economy generally.

Public Expenditure

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has to change the convention which governs what capital spending by local authorities is included in the public spending total. [3251]

Mr. Darling: I have no plans to change the definition of local authority capital spending in General Government Expenditure. The definition is consistent with international statistical conventions as laid down in the European System of accounts (ESA).

Tax Bands

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the current starting rate of income tax and the width of the lowest tax band in each member state of the European Union. [3452]

Dawn Primarolo: The information is given in the table. It is based on OECD information for 1995 or 1995–96 tax years, the latest for which comprehensive information is available. The income figures relate to earned income of single taxpayers and have been converted to £ sterling using 1995 OECD purchasing power parity figures.

	Starting rate of central government income tax %	*Income band for starting rate* £	*Tax threshold for single person* £
Austria	10	0–2,380	6,980
Belgium[1]	25	0–4,500	4,830
Denmark[2]	13	2,300–10,160	2,780
Finland[3]	7	4,680–6,470	5,140
France	12	2,290–5,000	3,910
Germany[4]	19	1,820–2,640	3,800
Greece	5	3,220–8,050	3,830
Ireland	27	2,580–9,170	3,810
Italy	10	0–2,860	3,460
Luxembourg	10	4,100–5,890	6,010
Netherlands	6.15	1,960–14,290	1,980
Portugal	15	0–5,330	3,340
Spain	20	2,220–3,320	4,630
Sweden[5]	see note	0–13,700	0
United Kingdom	20	3,525–6,725	3,525

Notes:

[1] Central income tax subject to surcharge of 3 per cent. in 1995. Local income taxes, averaging 7 per cent. of central tax (before surcharge) are also charged.

[2] Local income tax at average rate of 30.6 per cent. is charged in addition to 13 per cent. central rate.

[3] Local and church taxes at average rate of 18.8 per cent. are also charged and operate at a lower tax threshold than central tax.

[4] Excludes solidarity surcharge (7.5 per cent. of tax) and church tax (9 per cent. of tax).

[5] All taxpayers with any employment income pay tax at a flat rate of about £7 a year. Apart from this, central government tax is only charged on incomes above £13,700 at a rate of 25 per cent. However, local income tax, at an average rate of 31.5 per cent., is charged on all incomes above £610.

Computers (Millennium Date Change)

Mrs. May: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost *(a)* to the Treasury and *(b)* to public expenditure throughout Government of making the adaptations to computer programmes required by the change to the year 2000. [3540]

Mr. Darling: The Treasury and other Government departments are producing, by October 1997, fully costed plans for undertaking the work needed.

The cost of the work will be met from within the published departmental expenditure plans for 1997–98 and 1998–99.

Capital Gains

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how he defines short-term capital gains. [3364]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave him on 3 June, column *152*.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will report the Government's response to Mr. Malcolm Bates's review of the Private Finance Initiative; and if he will make a statement. [5392]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: I am today placing in the Members' Library a summary of the Bates review and a list of all its recommendations. It is a thorough piece of work for which the Government is most grateful. It builds upon the 12 Point Plan for Partnership originally published in the Labour Policy's Business Manifesto.

The Government promised to re-invigorate the PFI and that is what we have done. Malcolm Bates has applied a businessman's mind to this policy and produced specific recommendations which we accept in full as an agenda for action.

The review says that the PFI can secure improved value for money when handled well. But the public sector structure must be simplified and responsibilities made entirely clear.

Departments and agencies must be accountable for their own procurement decisions. However, it identifies a temporary need for a strong central input to help ensure delivery of quality transactions that provide a sound basis for future business.

To meet this need, we will, as recommended, create a new Treasury Private Finance Taskforce—combining central project and policy expertise. Its Chief Executive on the projects side will report direct to me. We will make an appointment in due course.

This individual will focus on the quality of PFI transactions. He will be supported by 6–8 Executives from the private sector with direct project management experience and financial skills. Until now, the Treasury has been involved too late in the process, leading to frustration and increased costs. The Taskforce will help central government departments and agencies road-test significant projects for their commercial viability *before* procurement begins.

The Taskforce's policy side will also have its hands full. The review includes specific recommendations to produce rapidly more standardised documentation for key stages of the procurement process. The Government wants greater certainty wherever it can be provided to help reduce bidding costs.

The Private Finance Panel will be stood down. I have written to all members today thanking them for their past contribution. The review acknowledges the immense value that high calibre members made in freely giving their time to meet key players, speak at conferences, write articles and support a growing band of Executives. However, it concluded that their on-going role was unclear and that there was a need to simplify organisational structures.

The recommendation to strengthen departmental Private Finance Units alongside the new Treasury Taskforce also takes away the need for the Private Finance Panel Executive. The Government accepts the Review recommendation that it should be disbanded by the end of September. Opportunities will, of course, exist within the new structure for those individuals currently with the Executive who have the skills and experience now required.

The agenda for action is detailed, practical and full of common sense. It will be welcomed as long overdue by companies and departments who have struggled for two long under previous management.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Arms Exports

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions were held between the British and German Governments prior to granting a license allowing the export of Henckler Koch MP5 sub-machine guns to Indonesia in 1995. [2776]

Mr. Fatchett: I am not aware of any such discussions.

COPEX Exhibition, Farnborough

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will identify by name, rank and unit, the Indonesian (i) military, (ii) security, (iii) police, (iv) paramilitary or (v) special forces personnel invited by the British Government to attend the forthcoming COPEX Exhibition at Farnborough in September 1997. [3585]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Defence on 18 June, column *217*.

Defence Equipment Exhibition, Farnborough

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the visas granted to Indonesian *(a)* military, *(b)* security, *(c)* police, *(d)* paramilitary and *(e)* special forces personnel invited by the British Government or private companies to attend the forthcoming Royal Navy and British Army Equipment Exhibition at Farnborough in September. [3588]

Mr. Fatchett: We have not been asked to issue visas specifically for Indonesians attending the RNBAEE 97 at Farnborough.

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will identify by name, rank and unit, such Indonesian *(a)* military, *(b)* security, *(c)* police, *(d)* paramilitary and *(e)* special forces personnel invited by the British Government to attend the forthcoming Royal Navy and British Army Equipment Exhibition at Farnborough in September 1997. [3584]

Mr. Spellar: The following Indonesian personnel have been invited to attend this year's Royal Navy and British Army Equipment Exhibition:

General Tanjung (Commander In Chief Indonesian Armed Forces);

General Wiranto (Chief of Staff Army);

Admiral Kushariadi (Chief of Staff Navy).

BBC World Service

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received on the jamming of BBC World Service broadcasts; and if he will make a statement. [4165]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: None recently. We deplore all attempts to jam World Service broadcasts and make representations to the Governments concerned.

Departmental Wages

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time persons employed by his Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3 an hour. [4191]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Full Time Staff: Two persons are employed earning less than £4 per hour. Four persons are employed earning less than £3.50 per hour. One person is employed by this Department's Executive Agency (Wilton Park) earning less than £3.50 per hour.

Part Time Staff: One person is employed earning less than £3.50 per hour. No staff earn less than £3 per hour. Earnings quoted take account of 1997 pay award. In all these cases, staff are employed outside London are not eligible for Recruitment and Retention Allowance.

Disability Discrimination (European Union)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs is he will introduce proposals to revise the treaty on European Union so as to *(a)* introduce a general power at a European level to outlaw discrimination against disabled people in policy areas where the European Union has competence under the treaty and *(b)* introduce a change to article 100a of the treaty on European Union so that all proposals put forward to regulate the internal market take into account the needs of disabled people. [3617]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 18 June 1997]:* At the Amsterdam European Council, we supported Article 6a allowing the Community to combat discrimination on grounds of disability. We also tabled a Declaration attached to Article 100a, calling on the institutions of the Community to take the needs of the disabled into account when framing internal market legislation. Both measures were adopted.

Polygraphs

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what use his Department makes of polygraphs; and if he will make a statement. [4584]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: This Department does not make use of polygraphs and has no plans to do so.

Kenya

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans next to visit Kenya. [4874]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has no immediate plans to visit Kenya. I will pay an official visit there from 25 to 27 June 1997.

Nuclear Arms

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he has taken to promote nuclear disarmament; and if he will make a statement. [4406]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have made clear our commitment to the goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons and determination to press for multilateral negotiations towards mutual, balanced and verifiable reductions in such weapons. We will be considering how best to implement these commitments, particularly in the context of the Strategic Defence Review.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of the International Court of Justice ruling on nuclear arms on United Kingdom policy; and if he will make a statement. [4758]

Mr. Lloyd: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave on 22 May to the honourable Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) column *135–36*.

Antarctic Treaty Secretariat

Mr. Corybn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made on the siting of a secretariat for the Antarctic treaty; and if he will make a statement. [4413]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: There is as yet no consensus amongst the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties on the location of the Treaty Secretariat. We are reviewing our policy in the light of developments at the recent Antarctic Treaty meeting in Christchurch.

Rockall

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will set out the legal basis for his Department's assertion that Rockkall is part of the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [4414]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: British sovereignty over Rockall was proclaimed in 1955. It was confirmed by the subsequent passing of the Island of Rockall Act 1972 which made Rockall part of Scotland.

NATO Expansion

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his estimate of the costs of NATO expansion to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic on the defence budgets of those countries and no other NATO members separately identifying the costs to the United Kingdom. [4403]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Twelve countries have applied to join NATO.

No decision has been taken on which countries will accede to NATO membership. The costs of enlargement, which fall both on the countries which join and on existing members of the Alliance and which will be incurred over a long period, will depend on that decision. Subject to that caveat, we expect the costs of enlargement to be manageable.

The US Government report to Congress in February 1997 gives an estimate of the direct additional costs of NATO enlargement of between $9 billion to £2 billion.

Qualified Majority Voting

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the various areas of extension of qualified majority voting under the Amsterdam treaty. [5026]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Presidency text on the extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) agreed at Amsterdam is below.

There will also be QMV for implementing decisions under the Common Foreign and Security Policy as provided for by Article J13. However a Member State may prevent a vote from being taken for important and stated reasons of national interest, whereupon the decision may be referred to the European Council for decision by unanimity.

The flexibility provisions in Articles 5a and K12 are also subject to qualified majority voting. However a similar national veto mechanism applies. The new Articles B (2) (b) (i) and (iii) in the new chapter on free movement of persons, asylum and immigration shall also be subject to QMV. The UK will not be obliged to take part in cooperation under this chapter.

Qualified majority voting

	Area
New Treaty provisions	
Article 4, new Title on Employment	Employment guidelines
Article 5, new Title on Employment	Incentive measures
Article 118(2)	Social exclusion
Article 119(3)	Equality of opportunity and treatment of men and women
Article 129(4)	Public health
Article 191a	Transparency
Article 209a	Countering fraud
Article 213a	Statistics
Article 213b	Establishment of independent advisory authority on data protection
Article 227(2)	Outermost regions
New Article	Customs cooperation
Existing Treaty provisions	
Article 45(3)	Compensatory aid for imports of raw materials
Article 56(2)	Coordination of provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action for special treatment for foreign nationals (right of establishment)
Article 130i(1)	Adoption of the research framework programme
Article 130i(2)	Adapting or supplementing the research framework programme
Article 130o	Setting up of joint undertakings in R&T development

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE-infected Material (Disposal)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the arrangements for the future disposal of BSE-infected carcases. [2825]

Mr. Rooker: It will continue to be the Ministry's practice to use incineration wherever feasible to dispose of cattle suspected of having BSE.

Abattoirs (Licences)

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the criteria by which abattoirs are licensed by the Intervention Board to slaughter cattle under the 30 month scheme. [3933]

Mr. Rooker: Abattoirs wishing to slaughter cattle qualifying for the Over Thirty Month Slaughter Scheme are currently being selected by competitive tender. The evaluation criteria are set out in the invitation to tender. They include compliance with statutory requirements, quality of service, geographical location and price.

BSE

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if it is his policy that all cows born in a given BSE-infected cohort within a given herd, regardless of the location of subsequent rearing, should be culled in any case where one or more cows in such a cohort are culled under the selective cull scheme. [3916]

Mr. Rooker: The scientific basis of the cull is that animals which ate the same feed as BSE cases in the first six months of their lives are likely to be at risk of exposure to infection through that feed. Any such exposed animals which have been sold from the natal herd will be traced as far as possible. Those animals found alive will be restricted and slaughtered.

We intend also to include animals which were reared together in their first six months of life, irrespective of where they were born, provided we can be reasonably sure that it was there, rather than in the natal herd, that exposure to infection took place. We are currently seeking agreement from the European Commission that to do so would be in line with the relevant EC legislation.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when his Department first contacted other member states of the EU advising them that BSE-contaminated feed should be removed from farms. [4282]

Mr. Rooker: The measures which Member States should take in order to avoid the feeding of BSE contaminated feed were discussed with representatives of the Commission and the other Member Stases in the Standing Veterinary Committee of 18–19 July 1989.

Mr. Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the dates on which farmers were advised by their national authorities to dispose of BSE-contaminated feed, in respect of each member state in the EU which imported such feed from the UK. [4285]

Mr. Rooker: Advice given by the authorities of the other Member States to their farmers is a matter of national competence and we do not have records of such advice.

Swine Fever

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ensure that the United Kingdom's EU partners take steps to eradicate classical swine fever; and if he will make a statement on the extent of classical swine fever in other EU countries. [3920]

Mr. Rooker: European Community legislation lays down requirements for the control and eradication of classical swine fever within the territory of a Member State and to prevent the spread of the disease from one Member State to another. Classical swine fever is currently present in Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain. The situation is being kept under continuous review by the EC Standing Veterinary Committee (SVC), on which the UK is represented. The SVC may adopt additional ad hoc safeguard measures which they believe are necessary to consolidate existing control and eradication measures.

Sellafield

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what notification his Department has received from British Nuclear Fuels in respect of increases in the discharge of radioactive waste materials from Sellafield. [3820]

Mr. Rooker: The Department receives routine discharge data from BNFL at Sellafield within three months of the end of the appropriate accounting period. In circumstances where a unusually high discharge occurs, the information is passed rapidly, as soon as it is available. Routine discharges are authorised by the Environment Agency. There are statutory powers to protect the safety of food, should it in any way be compromised.

Beef Imports

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice he has received on the legality, under EU law, of a unilateral ban on imports of European beef into the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [3793]

Mr. Rooker: We have not sought advice on the legality of a unilateral ban on imports of European beef since we are not proposing to introduce such a ban. The announcement made on 5 June by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, *Official Report*, columns 227–8, related to a proposal to apply current UK controls on specified bovine material to imported as well as home produced beef.

Mrs. May: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what mechanisms for monitoring standards in overseas slaughterhouses his Department has evaluated in connection with its consideration of an import ban on beef from slaughterhouses not meeting United Kingdom standards; and what conclusions have been reached. [4137]

Mr. Rooker: No import ban on beef from slaughterhouses not meeting UK standards is under consideration.

All fresh meat imported into the UK, whether from other Member States or third countries, must have been produced in accordance with harmonised Community rules laid down in Council Directive 64/433/EEC as amended, on health conditions for the production and marketing of fresh meat.

These rules require that, amongst other things, all fresh meat which is intended for human consumption fulfils the required public health standards. As far as slaughterhouses are concerned, they must be approved as meeting the requirements of the Directive and all meat leaving the slaughterhouse must bear a health mark. The inspection, approval and monitoring of slaughterhouses in third countries is the respnsibility of the European Commission. The inspection, approval and monitoring of slaughterhouses in Member States is the responsibility of the competent authority of the Member State concerned, although the Commission make on-site checks to ensure uniform application of the Directive.

Following advice from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, however, and in the absence of EU wide rules on the removal and disposal of specified bovine material (SBM), we are now consulting on proposals which would mean that our requirement to remove and dispose of SBM would apply not only to cattle which have died or been slaughtered in the UK, but also to bovine material which has been imported into this country. This is not an import ban.

Hunt Kennels

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list those hunt kennels which the State Veterinary Service has assessed to be unsatisfactory under the BSE enforcement programme, since 1 January. [3826]

Mr. Rooker: The State Veterinary Service (SVS) makes monthly unannounced visits to hunt kennels handling specified bovine material to audit the controls under the Specified Bovine Material Order 1997. Those premises at which failings were found during such visits since 1 January 1997 are listed below. The fact that failures have occurred does not necessarily mean that there is a risk to public health. Visits may be recorded as unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons, including minor, technical and short-lived problems. Following an unsatisfactory visit the operator of the premises is required to take immediate remedial action. A further unannounced visit is made shortly afterwards to check that this has been carried out.

List of hunt kennels that the SVS has assessed to be unsatisfactory since 1 January 1997

Sandhurst and Aldershot Beagles
Wishton Cottage
RMA Sandhurst
Camberley
Surrey

Belvoir Hunt Kennels
Woolsthorpe by Belvoir
Grantham
Lincolnshire
NG31 6QG

Puckeridge Hunt
Brent Pelham Hall
Buntingford
Hertfordshire

Holderness Hunt Kennels
Main Street
Etton
Beverley
North Humberside
HU17 7PG

The Chiddingfold Leconfield and Cowdray Foxhounds
The Hunt Kennels
Petworth
West Sussex

Bramham Moor Hunt Kennels
Hope Hall
Bramham Moor
Bramham
Boston Spa
West Yorkshire

Pennine Foxhounds
Upper Snape Farm
Harder Mill Road
Meltham
Huddersfield
West Yorkshire

Llangibby Foxhounds
Hunt Kennels
Llangibby
Usk
Gwent
Devon and Somerset Stag Hounds
The Kennels
Exford
Minehead
Somerset

The Kennels
Brocklsby park
Habrough
South Humberside
DN37 8PJ

Zetland Hunt Kennels
The Kennels
Aldborough St. John
Richmond
Surrey

Tedworth Foxhounds
The Kennels
Westcourt
Burbage
Marlborough
Wiltshire
SN8 3BW

Stevenstone Foxhounds
The Old Kennels
Torrington Station
Torrington
Devon

Pentyrch Hunt Kennels
The Kennels
Twyncoed Road
Pentyrch
Cardiff
Mid Glamorgan
Modbury Harriers
The Kennels Flete
Ermington
Ivybridge
Devon

South Shropshire Hunt
Annscroft
Shrewsbury
Shropshire
SY5 8AA

Departmental Wages

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many, *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time persons employed by his Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (ii) less than £3 an hour. [4189]

Mr. Morley: Staff in the Department are salaried and are not paid by the hour. However, I am able to provide a breakdown based on salary levels divided by normal full-time working hours of 36 hours per week in London or 37 hours elsewhere. This is set out in the table below.

	Full-time			*Part-time*		
	Number of staff less than £4/hour	*Number of staff less than £3.50/hour*	*Number of staff less than £3/hour*	*Number of staff less than £4/hour*	*Number of staff less than £3.50/hour*	*Number of staff less than £3/hour*
Core MAFF	606	55	0	33	0	0
CEFAS	13	2	0	0	4	0
PSD	8	5	0	0	0	0
VMD	4	0	0	0	0	0
FRCA	8	5	0	2	1	0
VLA	27	0	0	7	0	0
MHS	1	0	0	0	0	0
CSL	2	0	0	1	0	0
Total	669	67	0	43	5	0

The figures in the left-hand columns do not incorporate the totals from the other columns.

The above figures reflect 1996–97 salaries as the 1997 pay reviews have not yet been implemented.

Genetically Modified Food

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which countries require the labelling as such of genetically modified food. [4283]

Mr. Rooker: There are currently no internationally harmonised rules for labelling genetically modified (GM) foods. The main producers of these, the United States, Canada and Japan, do not require them to be labelled as such. In Europe, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and ourselves have all operated rules or guidelines governing the labelling of these materials for some time. As from 15 May, these were superseded by the labelling requirements of the EC Novel Foods Regulation (258/97) and we shall be pressing to ensure that the application of these leads to all foods being labelled if they contain GM material regardless of whether or not they have been segregated from conventional materials at an earlier stage in the food chain.

Beef Farmers

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will raise the 30 month cull limit to 36 months, with special reference to beef farmers using traditional, extensive grass-based systems. [3051]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer given on 19 June 1997]:* No. The Beef Assurance Scheme already provides for eligible animals aged to and including 42 months to be sold for human consumption. Eligible animals are those

from specialist, mainly grass reared beef herds in which no case of BSE has ever occurred and in which the risk of BSE occurring in the future is considered very low.

Cod Liver Oil (Toxin Levels)

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the results of the official survey of the toxin levels in code liver oil supplements. [4992]

Mr. Rooker: The results of the MAFF survey for dioxins and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in fish oil dietary supplements and licensed medicines were announced on 14 May 1997 by the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Kenneth Calman. Further details are available from MAFF on request and are also on the Internet.

Rabies

Mr. Malins: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if his officials have completed the review of rabies policy options begun in October 1996; and when he expects to publish the report; [5027]

(2) when he expects to publish the Green Paper on Rabies policy reform. [5028]

Mr. Rooker: The review referred to by the hon. Member was a matter for the previous Government. However, we are reviewing whether alternatives to quarantine might give equal or better protection against rabies. We would expect to consult at some point on this, but decisions on when and how to do so have yet to be taken.

DEFENCE

Army (Buy-outs)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many soldiers bought themselves out of the Army in each year since 1992. [4861]

Dr. Reid: The number of soldiers who have bought themselves out of the Army in each year since 1992 is as follows:

Financial year	*Trained soldiers outflow (premature voluntary release by purchase)*	*Outflow of recruits (on payment)*	*Total soldier outflow (on payment)*
1991–92	2,465	1,118	3,583
1992–93	2,130	1,038	3,168
1993–94	1,727	797	2,524
1994–95	1,603	869	2,472
1995–96	1,410	815	2,225
1996–97	821	1,219	2,040
Total	10,156	5,856	16,012

Polygraph

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what use his Department makes of the polygraph; and if he will make a statement. [4582]

Dr. Reid: My Department does not use the polygraph and has no plans to do so.

Pay and Personnel Agency

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what performance targets have been set for the Pay and Personnel Agency for 1997–98. [4917]

Mr. Spellar: The Chief Executive of the Pay and Personnel Agency (PPA) is responsible for providing pay and personnel services for the Ministry of Defence as defined in the Agency Framework Document. During 1997–98, the PPA will be set the following challenging key performance targets:

1. (a) While making 100 per cent. of payments of pay by the due date, the number of errors not to exceed 12 per 1,000 payments of weekly industrial pay.

(b) While making 100 per cent. of payments of pay by the due date, the number of errors not to exceed six per 1,000 payments of monthly non-industrial pay.

(c) While authorising 100 per cent. of awards of pensions by the due date, the number of errors not to exceed 20 per 1,000 awards.

(d) While making 100 per cent. of payments of expenses within 10 working days of receipts, the number of errors not to exceed 15 per 1,000 payments.

(e) To pay 100 per cent. of claims for fees and personal payments within nine working days of receipt.

2. By 31 August 1997 to introduce methods of measuring how well its services meet the customers' needs, building on the findings of the customer satisfaction study report completed in December 1996.

3. By 31 March 1998 to achieve efficiency savings to meet at least the Departmental target of 2 per cent. efficiency savings of annual operating costs.

4. To publish by 31 March 1998 a business case setting out the options available from potential private sector partners, in comparison with the cost of providing services from agency resources.

5. By 31 March 1998 to introduce a new personnel information system.

Prince Consort Library, Aldershot

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the Prince Consort Library in the Aldershot Garrison and its contents. [4616]

Dr. Reid *[holding reply Friday 20 June 1997]:* My Department is currently considering a number of options for the co-location within the United Kingdom of the Army Command Libraries, including the Prince Consort's Library at Aldershot. No decision has yet been taken.

US Nuclear Bases

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the costs to public funds of cleaning up the former United States nuclear bases; what is his estimate of the costs to the US authorities of thee operations; and if he will make a statement. [4407]

Mr. Spellar: Remediation will normally be undertaken on MoD land if there is a significant risk to health and safety or the environment, for instance where contamination poses a threat to individuals, water courses or neighbouring property. No special arrangements apply to bases formerly occupied by US forces. No significant costs incurred to date on their remediation have been identified. The Environment Act 1995 may impose additional remediation responsibilities on landowners and new enforcement arrangements, but the full implications for MoD land, including any formerly occupied by US forces, cannot yet be assessed.

Training Land

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* the number of landowners making their land available for training on private land and *(b)* the number of hectares they make available, adjacent to (i) Salisbury Plain training area, (ii) Otterburn training area and (iii) Sennybridge training area; and by what percentage training land is extended by the availability of training on private land in each of the three areas. [4750]

Mr. Spellar: The type of training undertaken on private land will usually differ from that conducted on MoD training areas: for example, training on Salisbury Plain training area is primarily armoured training whereas that on adjacent private land will not involve armoured vehicles. Training on private land cannot therefore be regarded as a simple extension of training on adjacent MoD land. The quantity and locations of training on private land will also vary from year to year. Subject to these qualifications, in the past 12 months, the figures requested have been as follows:

a. *Number of landowners making their land available:*

(i) Areas adjacent to Salisbury Plain training area (SPTA): 77

(ii) Areas adjacent to Otterburn training area (OTA): 21

(iii) Areas adjacent to Sennybridge training area (SENTA): 2

b. *Numbers of hectares made available:*

(i) Areas adjacent to Salisbury Plain training areas (SPTA): 10,000ha approximately

(ii) Areas adjacent to Otterburn training areas (OTA): 675ha approximately

(iii) Areas adjacent to Sennybridge training area (SENTA): 3ha approximately

c. *Private land made available as a percentage of adjacent MoD training land:*

(i) Areas adjacent to Salisbury Plain training areas (SPTA): 25 per cent. of SPTA

(ii) Areas adjacent to Otterburn training area (OTA): 2.9 per cent. of OTA

(iii) Areas adjacent to Sennybridge training area (SENTA): less than 0.1 per cent. of SENTA

Note: Private land adjacent to SENTA has been used for access only rather than manoeuvres.

Diversification Agency

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action his Department is taking to establish a defence diversification agency; and if he will make a statement. [4754]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon), *Official Report*, 16 June, col. *11*.

Expenditure

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to publish the estimates for defence expenditure; and if he will make a statement. [4756]

Dr. Reid: Estimates of defence expenditure in the current financial year are contained in "Supply Estimates 1997–98: Main Estimates", which were published in March this year. As I explained in my written reply to the hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife, (Mr. Campbell) on 3 June, *Official Report*, column *121*), we do not intend this year to publish a forward looking statement of policy in the form of a Statement on the Defence Estimates (SDE). Factual material on the activities of my Department and the Armed Forces in the last year, which is usually contained in the SDE, will however, appear in an expanded MOD Performance Report which the Department plans to publish in the Autumn.

European Fighter Aircraft

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his estimate of the total cost of the European fighter aircraft project; and what proportion of these costs will be borne by the United Kingdom. [4405]

Mr. Spellar: The estimated procurement cost of the Eurofighter projet is £41.6 billion. As I told my right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) on 2 June, *Official Report*, column *14*, up to 31 March 1997 the UK's expenditure on the Eurofighter programme totalled £2.7 billion. Future UK procurement expenditure is currently estimated at £12.7 billion. Figures are at average 1996–97 prices.

Trident

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 16 June, *Official Report*, column *3*, if he will give a breakdown of the annual operating cost of Trident; and if he will estimate future capital expenditure on the project. [4759]

Dr. Reid: It is too early in the life of the Trident programme accurately to assess operating costs but we estimate them to be in the order of £200 million per annum over a 30 year in-service life. This estimate encompasses manpower and related costs, refits of the submarines, stores and transport costs, a share of the running costs of shore facilities, an element of the costs of the Atomic Weapons Establishment, in-service support of the submarines and their weapon systems and decommissioning and disposal costs. Estimated future capital expenditure on the project is as stated by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Defence in his answer of 16 June, *Official Report*, column *3*.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the operational purpose of the Trident nuclear missile system. [4416]

Dr. Reid: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given on 16 June 1997 to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones), *Official Report*, column *81*.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of keeping the Trident fleet *(a)* on 24 hour patrol and *(b)* on stand by. [4757]

Dr. Reid: Figures are not available in the form requested.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the ordering of a fifth Trident submarine. [4417]

Mr. Spellar: We have no such plans.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the report from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament concerning the costs of Trident, a copy of which has been sent to him; and if he will make a statement. [5025]

Dr. Reid: We are not aware of a recent report from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament concerning the costs of Trident. We have, however, recently received a number of letters and postcards on this subject. Our latest estimate of the total acquisition cost of the Trident programme is £12.57 billion at 1996–97 economic conditions, over £3.6 billion less in real terms than the original 1982 estimate. Operating costs are estimated to be some £200 million per annum over a 30 year in-service life.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for a nuclear weapons system to replace Trident; and if he will make a statement. [4408]

Mr. Spellar: Decisions on a successor to Trident would not be needed for a number of years. They could be taken in the light of progress towards our goal of verifiable global nuclear disarmament.

Beef

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what volume of beef and beef products was purchased by his Department in 1996 and what percentage originated *(a)* in the United Kingdom, *(b)* in Germany, *(c)* in other European Union countries and *(d)* in non-European Union countries. [4654]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 20 June 1997]:* Approximately 1.25 million kilograms of beef is purchased annually by my Department. This figure excludes beef in finished products for which figures are not readily available. Purchase records are not kept in sufficient detail to allow the identification of the percentage of beef originating from the particular trading areas requested, but the majority is known to come from non-European countries.

HOME DEPARTMENT

WPC Yvonne Fletcher

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 10 June, *Official Report*, column *388*, on WPC Yvonne Fletcher, what is the result of the review of the contents of the programme by the Metropolitan police. [3782]

Mr. Straw: The Metropolitan Police are continuing their review. This involves a good deal of detailed analysis of the extensive documentation already generated by their investigation. They expect to have completed their analysis by the end of September 1997.

Immigration (Detention Policy)

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the scope of the general review of the Government's immigration detention policy; what the time scale is for the review; and whether external organisations will be consulted. [3939]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The review is being conducted internally in the Home Office. Its scope is wide ranging to cover all aspects of immigration detention policy. We expect the results to be available later in the summer. External organisations have been informed that the review is taking place.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time persons employed by his Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3 an hour. [4196]

Mr. Straw: The information for the core Home Office and its Agencies, based on gross hours and on basic pay, is as follows:

Full-time

(i) less than £4 per hour = 828

(ii) less than £3.50 per hour = 459

(iii) less than £3 per hour = nil

Part-time

(i) less than £4 per hour = 329

(ii) less than £3.50 per hour = 12

(iii) less than £3 per hour = nil

Allowances in regular payment (for example, London Weighting) reduce these totals as follows:

Full-time

(i) less than £4 per hour = 449

(ii) less than £3.50 per hour = 304

(iii) less than £3 per hour = nil

Part-time

(i) less than £4 per hour = 6

(ii) less than £3.50 per hour = 8

(iii) less than £3 per hour = nil

Land Development (Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans his Department has to develop land adjacent to Wandsworth Prison; if Wandsworth Council has been fully informed of these proposals; and if he will make a statement. [4439]

Ms Joyce Quin: It is proposed to provide a stores building, a pre-release hostel, a visitors' centre and a 125-place car park on the land adjacent to Wandsworth prison. These proposals were discussed at a meeting with Wandsworth Council prior to an application for outline planning permission being submitted on 1 May.

Sexual Offences

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the ratio of reported sexual attacks and offences to population in *(a)* designated new towns and *(b)* other towns of similar size. [4467]

Mr. Michael: Information on recorded crime in England and Wales is collated centrally only on the basis of police force areas. Individual police forces do collate more localised data but this would not necessarily equate to new town boundaries.

Confiscation of Alcohol (Young Persons) Act 1997

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress he has made in preparing the necessary statutory instruments for the Confiscation of Alcohol (Young Persons) Act 1997. [4865]

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he proposes to implement the Confiscation of Alcohol (Young Persons) Act 1997. [4604]

Deaths (Proscribed Drugs)

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many deaths arising from overdoses of a proscribed drug there were in each of the last five years for which figures are available by type of drug. [4840]

Mr. Michael: Summary statistics of deaths involving controlled drugs are given in the table. It is not possible to determine accurately which of these were caused by drug overdoses. Fuller details, including the type of drug involved, are contained in tables 17, 18 and 19 of the following Home Office Statistical Bulletins—issue 6/92, "Statistics of drug addicts notified to the Home Office, United Kingdom, 1991"; issue 15/93, "Statistics of drug addicts notified to the Home Office, United Kingdom, 1992"; issue 10/94, "Statistics of drug addicts notified to the Home Office, United Kingdom, 1993"; issue 15/95, "Statistics of drug addicts notified to the Home Office, United Kingdom, 1995". Copies of these publications are in the Library.

United Kingdom — *Number of deaths*

Underlying cause of death	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994
Drug dependence and non-dependent abuse of drugs[1]	294	307	345	322	489
Deaths from poisoning where a controlled drug was mentioned[2]					
Accidental	233	255	327	358	442
Suicide	440	433	400	340	334
Undetermined	262	295	274	252	243
AIDS	55	79	82	107	112
Total	1,284	1,369	1,428	1,379	1,620

[1] Includes solvents and other non-controlled drugs such as alcohol.

[2] Excludes Northern Ireland.

Treason and Piracy (Maximum Sentences)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to abolish the death penalty for the offences of *(a)* treason and *(b)* piracy; and if he will make a statement. [4646]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 20 June 1997]:* The Government have no such plans at present.

Fire Safety

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce legislation on fire safety analogous to the Fire Safety Bill introduced in the last Parliament. [5015]

Mr. George Howarth: The Government strongly support the aims of the Fire Safety Bill and will be looking for appropriate opportunities to achieve those aims. I have asked my officials, as a priority, to provide me with an outline of the options that are available. As part of that process, officials are in the middle of a series of discussions with some of the key stakeholders to hear their views on the best way to proceed. Discussion of the Fire Safety Bill will then be at the top of the agenda for discussion by the Joint Fire Safety Committee of the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council at its next meeting on 8 July.

Sport (Crowd Control)

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the impact of measures to deal with soccer-related crowd problems on other major spectator team sports. [3103]

Mr. Michael: The measures taken to deal with crowd disorder in football have been specific to football. These include controls on the sale and possession of alcohol under the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol etc.) Act 1985; the exclusion order scheme under Part IV of the Public Order Act 1986; the restriction order scheme under Part II of the Football Spectators Act 1989; and the creation of four football specific offences under the Football (Offences) Act 1991 and section 166 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994.

The police have other powers which apply at all sports. In particular, the 1986 Public Order Act enables the police to take action against a broad range of disorderly behaviour. There are also powers to deal with vandalism, damage to property and assault.

If there is evidence from the police that the problem of crowd disorder has become more widespread and is having a significant impact on other sports, we will review the need for further measures.

Representation of the People Act 1983

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will undertake a review of the law as it applies to the Representation of the People Act 1983. [3116]

Mr. George Howarth: We have no plans to do so at present.

Coroners

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review the role and functions of coroners. [3119]

Mr. George Howarth: We have no plans to do so, but arrangements are kept under review.

Fines (Motorists)

Professor Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to allow *(a)* local authorities and *(b)* police forces to retain some of the proceeds from fines levied upon speeding motorists caught by speed cameras. [4415]

Mr. Michael: None. Hypothecating the revenue from speeding fines would result in expenditure on traffic enforcement being determined by the income generated, rather than the relative priority of the activity.

In the light of the Home Office's study of the cost-benefit analysis of traffic light and speed cameras, we have decided to examine the funding arrangements for the cameras and consider what more might be done.

Entry Visas

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reduce the cost of entry visas to the United Kingdom. [4015]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I have been asked to reply.

We continually look at ways to make efficiency savings to enable us to reduce entry clearance fees. Fees, which are set to recover the cost of processing an application world wide to minimise the burden on the taxpayer, are reviewed annually. The standard single entry fee has not been increased since January 1995. The current fees, introduced on 10 June 1997, include a reduction in the cost for a five year multiple entry visa.

SCOTLAND

Private Finance Initiative (Health Service)

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects to conclude his review of PFI projects in the health service in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [4201]

Mr. Galbraith: Alongside the review being undertaken by the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) I have been undertaking a similar review of Health PFI schemes in Scotland. I have today written to all Scottish MPs, giving full details of the conclusions I have reached.

I am committed to delivering PFI-led service improvements in the Scottish Health Service. A number of high quality PFI projects, such as those at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh and the hospitals at Law and Hairmyres, which will deliver clear health care benefits, are well placed to proceed to financial close. I wish to see those benefits on the ground as quickly as possible and have asked my officials to push forward with these.

However it has become clear that other projects are not appropriate for the PFI process. Last week (Monday 16 June) I announced that, in view of the urgent nature of the maternity and theatre proposals at Glasgow Royal Infirmary, we would push these aspects of the project forward through £36 million of public funding. Other aspects of the original project, such as catering and the car park facilities, will continue to be pursued under PFI.

After consideration, I have concluded that the PFI process at the Western General in Edinburgh should also be halted. The PFI project for the Western is complicated by the fact that it is an existing NHS site with a large number of buildings of varying ages, functions and conditions. My view is that in the case of the Western General, PFI is not the right route. Instead the Government intend to provide around £40 million to fund a new ward and theatre block which is so clearly needed. Our proposals will also enable the go-ahead of the midwife-led maternity unit.

I think it only right that further major PFI projects such as the Western Infirmary should be taken forward only once the overall review of the PFI process in Health has been completed. However there are numerous other relatively smaller Scottish Health projects exploring PFI. I want Trusts and Boards to continue to pursue these projects and to come forward with new proposals. There will be rigorous scrutiny of these projects at every stage of their development. A project must be proven to be affordable, value for money and, most importantly, offer real health care improvements for Scotland.

I will be working closely with my hon. colleague, the Minister of State, Department of Health, over the coming months at improving the PFI product and will also be exploring the possibility of developing other models of structured private finance schemes in the longer term.

Illegal Weapons

Mr. Willian Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list by police force the number of persons shot with illegal weapons in each of the last three years and the current year, indicating *(a)* how many persons were (i) killed and (ii) injured, *(b)* the type of firearm used, *(c)* the calibre of firearms used, *(d)* the number of persons made answerable to the courts in respect of such crimes and *(e)* the number of occasions the police have sent an armed response team to an incident. [4052]

Mr. McLeish: The following tables detail the number of persons (i) killed and (ii) injured with illegal weapons

in the years 1992–95 in Scotland. The figures relate only to cases in which both the accused and the weapon were identified; in other cases, it is not possible to say whether or not the weapon was legally certificated.

Since January 1994, Scottish police forces have despatched armed police officers to over 2,000 incidents where a firearm was reported or suspected. The number of these incidents where an illegal firearm was actually involved is not recorded. The remaining information is not collect centrally.

Number of persons killed by type of weapon, 1992 to 1995

	Shotgun	*Rifle*	*Pistol/revolver*	*Total*
1992				
Grampian	2	—	—	2
Strathclyde	3	—	—	3
Total	5	—	—	5
1993				
Dumfries and Galloway	—	—	1	1
Strathclyde	1	—	2	3
Total	1	—	3	4
1994				
Northern	—	1	—	1
Lothian and Borders	—	—	1	1
Strathclyde	1	1	1	3
Total	1	2	2	5
1995				
Tayside	1	—	—	1
Total	1	—	—	1

In addition, there were a number of fatalities in which the weapon was unidentified and therefore it could not be determined whether or not it was legally held or not. There were two such cases in 1994 and six in 1995.

Number of persons injured by type of weapon, 1992 to 1995

	Shotgun	*Rifle*	*Pistol revolver*	*Total*
1992				
Central	2	—	—	2
Lothian and Borders	1	—	—	1
Strathclyde	9	—	2	11
Tayside	2	3	—	5
Total	14	3	2	19
1993				
Central	1	—	—	1
Dumfries and Galloway	—	—	3	3
Strathclyde	10	—	2	12
Tayside	4	—	—	4
Total	15	—	5	20
1994				
Central	—	—	2	2
Fife	3	—	—	3
Lothian and Borders	—	—	1	1
Strathclyde	4	—	1	5
Total	7	—	4	11

Number of persons injured by type of weapon, 1992 to 1995

	Shotgun	*Rifle*	*Pistol revolver*	*Total*
1995				
Fife	—	—	2	2
Lothian and Borders	1	—	2	3
Strathclyde	4	—	—	4
Total	5	—	4	9

In addition, there were a number of injuries in which a weapon was fired but unidentified and it was not therefore possible to determine whether the weapon was legally held or not. There was one such case in 1993, 11 in 1994 and 15 in 1995.

Low Pay

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time employees or his Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3 an hour. [4193]

Mr. Dewar: Of those employed in my Department and its Executive Agencies in April 1997, 383 full-time employees have basic salaries below £4/hour; 3 adults and 25 staff aged under 18 have basic salaries below £3.50/hour; with a further 17 staff all aged under 18 below £3/hour. Among part-time staff, 27 have basic salaries below £4/hour with no-one under £3.50/hour.

Radioactive Discharges

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he intends that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's regulation of radioactive discharges in Scotland will fall within the responsibilities of the proposed Scottish Parliament. [4223]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 19 June 1997]:* The Government's proposals for a Scottish Parliament will be set out in a White Paper which my right hon. Friend expects to publish before the House rises for its summer recess.

Environment Protection Agency

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will indicate for each of the organisations replaced by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency in 1996; and whether they operated under an exemption in terms of the Value Added Tax Act 1994, section 33. [4220]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 19 June 1997]:* The predecessor bodies of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency were River Purification Boards, District and Islands Councils, Her Majesty's Industrial Pollution Inspectorate (HMIPI) and the Hazardous Waste Inspectorate (HWI). With the exception of HMIPI and HWI, both formerly parts of The Scottish Office, all those bodies had the right to precept on local taxation and thus were entitled to claim refunds of VAT under the terms of Section 33 of the Value Added Tax Act 1994.

SEPA does not have the power to precept on local taxation and is therefore not eligible to claim refunds of VAT in this way.

Ms Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the responsibilities of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. [4221]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 19 June 1997]:* The principal responsibilities of SEPA are:-

- consenting of discharges to the water environment (surface, tidal and ground waters);
- conserving water resources as far as practicable and promoting the conversation and enhancement of the natural beauty and amenity of controlled waters;
- providing flood warning systems, assessing the risk of flooding on any area and advising planning authorities on flood risk;
- granting abstraction licences for irrigation where a control order is in force;
- issuing authorisations to prevent, minimise or render harmless the release of substances into the environment from prescribed processes;
- authorising the handling and disposal of radioactive materials and registering persons holding or using such materials;
- licensing of waste management activities;
- registering waste carriers and brokers and regulating the transfrontier shipment of waste;
- taking enforcement action against persons breaching licence conditions or illegally polluting the environment;
- carrying out assessments of the general state of the environment (if required by the Secretary of State);
- keeping up-to-date on pollution control technology, with powers to undertake relevant research and development;
- creating smoke control areas;
- ensuring compliance with the "producer responsibility" regulations as directed by the Secretary of State.

In carrying out these specific responsibilities, SEPA is required to:-

- have regard both to the desirability of conserving and enhancing the natural and man-made environment and to the social and economic needs of any area; and
- take into account the likely costs and benefits of exercising its powers.

Ms Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the refusal to grant the Scottish Environment Protection Agency an exemption in terms of the Value Added Tax Act 1994, section 33; and if he will make a statement. [4222]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 19 June 1997]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland regularly discusses various issues with colleagues, including my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Forestry

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will estimate for each of the past five years for (i) England, (ii) Scotland and (iii) Wales the total *(a)* broadleaf tree cover, *(b)* evergreen tree cover, *(c)* area felled and *(d)* area planted; and if he will make a statement. [4409]

Mr. Chisholm: The information is set out in the tables below.

All areas in thousands of hectares

Year ending 31 March	*Area of broadleaved woodland*[1]	*Area of conifer woodland*[1]	*Area approved for felling*[2]	*Area planted*[3]
ENGLAND				
1993	574	393	11	12
1994	581	392	11	13
1995	587	390	8	10
1996	591	390	8	9
1997	596	389	7	9
SCOTLAND				
1993	171	976	8	20
1994	181	975	9	18
1995	188	979	10	20
1996	192	984	11	17
1997	197	990	10	19
WALES				
1993	77	171	4	3
1994	79	169	3	3
1995	80	167	4	3
1996	81	167	4	3
1997	82	166	4	3

[1]The areas of broadleaved and comfier woodland are based on the 1980 Census of Woodlands. They have been updated by including the estimated changes since then.
[2]The Forestry Commission does not record the areas felled by private woodland owners, but it does record the areas approved for felling. However, approvals are valid for a five year period, and large areas which are approved for felling are never felled.
[3]The areas planted include both the areas of felled woodland which are replanted and the areas of new woodlands which are created.

Transport Policy

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how he proposes to provide an effective and integrated transport policy; and what plans he has to carry out a strategic review of the roads programme in Scotland. [5142]

Mr. Dewar: My noble Friend, the Minister with responsibility for agriculture, the environment and fisheries announced on Thursday—*Official Report, House of Lords*, column *136*—our intention to publish a White Paper early next year which will set out our proposals for a workable, effective and integrated transport policy appropriate to the needs of Scotland. Our development of that will operate in parallel with the development of the planned White Paper on integrated transport policy announced by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on 5 June, column *226*.

One key strand of developing an integrated transport strategy is the strategic review of the trunk roads programme promised in the Manifesto. We believe that we need a thorough examination of our rationale for new roads construction. Possible new roads projects must be properly examined in the context of their local and wider economic and environmental impacts and with the possible provision of alternative modes of transport properly considered in parallel. Our eventual decisions must meet our commitment to sustainable development.

This review will consider the full range of factors, including traffic growth, which will give rise to pressure for further major improvements across the trunk road

network over the next decade. In parallel with the review, as part of the work leading to the White Paper, we shall examine means of restraining growth, including consideration of the opportunities for doing so on the trunk road network. We will also consider the role which new technology and improved information systems can play.

The review will examine the criteria (including accessibility, safety, economy and environmental impact) for setting priorities within the trunk road programme. It will also review the scope for improved value for money for expenditure on maintenance, structural repairs and minor schemes.

The review is being conducted against the background of our clear commitment to control public expenditure overall and fundamentally to review expenditure priorities through the comprehensive spending review. Given this, no further procedural work on major schemes will be undertaken before the reviews are concluded. However, schemes under construction will continue; and the schemes for the A828 (Creagan Bridge) and the A75 (The Glen), which are both close to commencement, will also continue. Tenders are expected in July for a privately financed design, build, finance and operate contract on the M8 (Baillieston to Shotts) and a decision on that will be announced after the evaluation of tenders, in the light of the information provided by the tenders and other relevant factors. The review will reach conclusions on options for the Kincardine Bridge in advance of those on other projects because of the uncertainties attaching to the operational condition of the bridge and the need to progress contingency plans.

The Scottish Office will continue to invest in the maintenance and structural repairs of the existing network and take forward small schemes, costing less than £3 million, where route action and accident plans have identified measures to alléviate congestion and improve safety.

There has been extensive comments about the previous Government's Green paper "Keeping Scotland Moving" and these, where appropriate, will be considered as part of both the development of our White Paper and the review of the trunk roads programme. We intend to consult about the options and the findings emerging from the review, with the objective of concluding the review by the Summer of 1998.

Home Energy Efficiency Grants

Mrs. Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to amend the home energy efficiency scheme to encourage applications from the Scottish islands and remote areas. [3797]

Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

Major revisions to this scheme, which were made by the previous administration, come into force on 1 July. From that date the scheme will include cavity wall insulation, loft insulation, heating control system upgrades, draughtproofing, energy efficient lamps, hot water tank insulation and personal advice. Installers have been appointed throughout Great Britain and they will undertake local marketing throughout their areas to bring the scheme to the attention of eligible householders. Every local authority will shortly receive guidance, issued jointly with the Scottish Office, about the scheme and the part they can play in promoting it.

We shall be taking an early opportunity to review the scheme to check whether the changes are meeting the needs of customers.

CABINET OFFICE

Cabinet Committees

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio if he will make a statement on his role in respect of each Cabinet committee on which he sits. [4661]

Mr. Mandelson: Like my colleagues on these committees, I contribute to collective consideration of the issues under discussion.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Government Car Service

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if the Government car service will assess the advantages of using Triumph motorcycles for its dispatch riders. [4316]

Dr. David Clark: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Government Car and Despatch Agency. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. Nick Matheson, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Nick Matheson to Mr. Peter Bottomley, dated 20 June 1997:

I have been asked by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to reply to your Parliamentary Question on using Triumph motorcycles for the InterDespatch Service's courier despatch service. I am the Chief Executive of the Agency with operational responsibility for the InterDespatch Service.

The current fleet of six motorcycles was purchased in April 1996 following a technical and operational evaluation of suitability for courier work. This included research with existing users, particularly in assessing load carrying capacity.

The motorcycle fleet is due for replacement in approximately two years, and I will be carrying out a new assessment towards the end of this year. That assessment will include machines produced by Triumph.

Compliance Cost Assessments

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if the rules relating to the deposit of compliance cost assessments in the Library prior to the publication of Bills in force in Session 1996–97 continue to apply; and if he will list those Bills for which compliance cost assessments have not been duly deposited in the current session. [4747]

Dr. David Clark: We intend to develop a more succinct, open and relevant system for assessing the costs and benefits of new legislative proposals. In the meantime, the existing rules for publishing a compliance cost assessment alongside bills presented to Parliament

continue to apply. The responsibility for the preparation of individual compliance cost assessments rests with the relevant Minister.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Departmental Advisers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Attorney-General if he will list the special advisers in his Department, the Minister to whom each is responsible, the subjects on which they advise and the number of advisers in his Department in the year up to 1 May. [5347]

The Attorney-General: No special advisers are, or have been, employed in my Department.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Tourism Industry

10. **Mrs. McGuire:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has for encouraging the improvement of training and qualifications in the tourism industry. [3090]

19. **Ms Jenny Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has for encouraging the improvement of training and qualifications in the tourist industry. [3102]

Mr. Tom Clarke: Training and investment in people is one of our key policy aims for the tourism and hospitality industries. We will pursue this aim in partnership with those industries, tourist boards, local authorities and others, together with colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment.

18. **Mr. Dobbin:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to increase the United Kingdom income from tourism. [3101]

Mr. Clarke: The Government is working with the industry, the tourist boards, local authorities and others to ensure that tourism is making its full contribution to the UK economy. In 1995, the industry was worth £38 billion, equivalent to over 5 per cent. of the UK's GDP, and it has great potential for growth.

26. **Mrs. Humble:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what work opportunities the tourism industry will provide to the welfare-to-work programme. [3111]

Mr. Clarke: The tourism industry is well placed to play a key role in the welfare-to-work initiative. The industry has enormous potential for employment generation. It already supports some 1.6 million jobs, a number which could grow up to one million in the next decade. We shall be looking to leading employers within the industry to support the Government's initiative.

National Lottery

11. **Mr. Pearson:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to ensure a fairer distribution of lottery proceeds across the regions. [3094]

Mr. Chris Smith: It is clear that some areas of the country have benefited a great dal more from the lottery than others. We will be looking at the reasons for this as part of our review of lottery distribution. We will publish a White Paper containing our proposals in July.

16. **Ms Atherton:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to change the terms of the operation of the national lottery. [3099]

Mr. Banks: My Department does not have the power to change the terms of operation for the current licence holder. We will seek an efficient and competitive not-for-profit operator when the existing licence expires in 2001.

21. **Mr. Spring:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will make it his policy to allow the national lottery to operate overseas; and if he will make a statement. [3105]

Mr. Smith: The operator of the national lottery may under the terms of its licence sell tickets in other member states of the European Community and the European Economic Area provided such sales are not prevented by the state's domestic legislation. Ticket sales outside this permitted area are not allowed under the licence. Any change to the licence would require the Director General's consent.

23. **Mr. Desmond Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to review the terms of the lottery operator's licence. [3107]

Mr. Smith: I have announced our intention to seek an efficient not-for-profit operator when the current licence expires. I do not have the power to change the terms of operation for the current licence holder.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will list the *(a)* grants of and *(b)* expenditure of lottery moneys by economic region up until 1 April 1997 (i) in total and (ii) expressed in terms of expenditure per capita in the region. [3185]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* A full list of awards is available from the Library of the House. The table sets out the summary of the total number and value of awards by region and country, including a per capita breakdown:

National lottery awards to 31 March 1997

	Population	*Total number of awards*	*Total award amount £*	*Amount per capita £*
England				
London: Total	6,933,000	1,664	774,055,059	111.65
London (National Institutions)	—	39	478,007,408	68.95
London (Other)	—	1,625	296,047,651	42.70
North-west	5,478,725	1,008	300,729,369	54.89

National lottery awards to 31 March 1997

	Population	Total number of awards	Total award amount £	Amount per capita £
North-east	2,607,991	499	125,497,849	48.12
Yorkshire and Humberside	5,035,194	929	200,307,425	39.78
Eastern	5,259,958	969	142,183,266	27.03
East Midlands	4,114,069	820	120,472,373	29.28
West Midlands	5,311,676	1,121	252,515,234	47.54
South-west	4,816,084	1,143	198,923,974	41.30
South-east	7,813,949	1,282	255,618,101	32.71
Merseyside	1,441,000	313	71,045,017	49.30
Total	48,811,646	9,748	2,441,347,667	50.02
Scotland	5,120,200	1,681	366,992,062	71.68
Wales	2,906,500	1,555	180,000,285	61.93
Northern Ireland	1,632,000	941	74,058,147	45.38
Total	9,658,700	4,177	621,050,494	64.30
UK wide	58,470,346	5,580	83,182,384	1.42
Grand total	58,470,346	19,505	3,145,580,545	53.80

[1] Population figures are drawn from the Registrar Generals' population projection for 1994 based on the estimated resident population at mid-1991, for County Councils and the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys 1993, for Metropolitan areas.
[2] London figures indicates amount per capita once awards to National institutions are discounted.

Film Industry

13. **Barbara Follett:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what measures he proposes to encourage Britain's creative industries with particular reference to film. [3096]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department recently announced the setting up of a Film Policy Review Group whose task will be to formulate an agenda for action for the film industry and for the Government's support to it. It will be the aim of the group to double the audience for British films and to help the film industry to achieve its full creative and economic potential.

More broadly, the Government will take action to help the creative industries to flourish, thereby creating new jobs and new opportunities in the domestic market, boosting exports, and encouraging tourism and inward investment.

24. **Dr. Kumar:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to assist the British film industry. [3109]

Mr. Tom Clarke: My Department recently announced the setting up of a Film Policy Review Group whose task will be to formulate an agenda for action for the film industry and for the Government's support to it. It will be the aim of the group to double the audience for British films and to help the film industry to achieve its full creative and economic potential.

The Group will be co-chaired by myself and Stewart Till of PolyGram Filmed Entertainment. The members all have a real working knowledge of what it takes to achieve artistic and commercial success, both in Britain and abroad.

Regional Orchestras

14. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will make a statement concerning his policy on regional orchestras. [3097]

Mr. Fisher: The Government has placed access at the heart of its arts policies. I have the highest regard for the excellence of our regional orchestras and for the opportunities they create for more people to enjoy music. The regional orchestras, including the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, in which I know my hon. Friend takes a particularly keen interest, are bringing music of the highest standards to audiences across the country and, indeed, abroad.

Public Library Services

15. **Dr. Lynda Clark:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to increase the availability of public library services. [3098]

27. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to increase the availability of public library services. [3112]

Mr. Fisher: The Government is committed to developing the public library service as an essential part of an informed and educated society. The harnessing of new technology will play a vital part in this. I have therefore asked the Library and Information Commission to report on how public libraries can respond effectively to the challenge of new information and communication technology. Its report is due at the end of July.

Millennium Exhibition

17. **Mr. Timms:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what are his Department's proposals for the millennium exhibition. [3100]

Mr. Chris Smith: Last week my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirmed our full backing for the millennium exhibition. We took this decision on the basis of five clear commitments to the British people: the exhibition will have a durable legacy; it will have

nationwide relevance and links; it will have a content that reflects technological progress and provides a window to the future; it will cost no more public money, other than that required for site clearance; and it will have an enhanced creative team.

Arts (Public Access)

20. **Mrs. Ann Keen:** To ask the Secretary of State for the National Heritage what plans he has to enable greater access by the public to the arts. [3104]

Mr. Fisher: Access is at the heart of my Department's policies. We believe strongly that the public has a right to better access in return for the public funding which goes into the arts. We have made a number of specific proposals aimed at increasing access to the arts. These include plans to pilot open theatre nights and an Artscard scheme for young people and to review the case for admission charges to core collections in our national museums and galleries.

Land (National Heritage Memorial Fund)

22. **Mr. Macdonald:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will review the provisions relating to the purchase of land in the national interest through the national heritage memorial fund. [3106]

Mr. Banks: The Government is reviewing the distribution of lottery proceeds generally. We will be considering the funding strategies of all the distributing bodies as part of that review. But we see no immediate need to amend the statutory powers of the National Heritage Memorial Fund in relation to land acquisition projects.

Royal Naval College, Greenwich

25. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will discuss with the Secretary of State for Defence the future of the Royal Naval College, Greenwich. [3110]

Mr. Banks: Officials in my Department are working closely with officials in the Ministry of Defence, the Greenwich Foundation for the Royal Naval College, (the new trust), and Greenwich Hospital in working up proposals for the future of this historic site, following the Royal Navy's departure.

Guest Houses and Hotels

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to introduce a national scheme for the grading of guest houses and hotels. [3163]

Mr. Tom Clarke: The AA, RAC and ETB announced in February plans for a new harmonised scheme which for the first time would give a single rating for hotels according to both the quality of their service and the facilities they offer. They will be consulting the industry on the details of this and on a scheme covering non-hotel serviced accommodation, such as guest-houses, B&Bs, farmhouses and inns.

Broadcasting

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what steps he is taking to increase the provision of local broadcasting by *(a)* radio and *(b)* television. [4739]

Mr. Fisher: The existing regulatory framework already allows for increased local provision.

The Radio Authority is required to secure a range and diversity of local services. Since its creation, the number of commercial local radio services has increased from 130 in 1991 to 177 in 1996. The Authority has also recently introduced small-scale alternative location licencees, and the number of short-term Restricted Service Licences continues to increase. These mechanisms provide a flexible structure within which more modest local operations can flourish.

The Independent Television Commission has recently published guidance on how it intends to implement the provisions of the Broadcasting Act 1996 which introduced a new category of licence for local services and special events—the Restricted Service Licence. Subject to spectrum availability, this new licence category will enable the ITC to oversee the expansion of local television services.

We aim to secure a wide diversity of broadcasting services, and local services are an important element of that diversity. The Government will monitor the effectiveness of the existing and recently enhanced licensing arrangements in providing more local services.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage when he will next meet the Director General of *(a)* the Radio Authority and *(b)* the Independent Television Commission to discuss the conditions of ownership of local radio stations. [4740]

Mr. Fisher: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State meets the Chairmen and Chief Executives of the Radio Authority and the Independent Television Commission from time to time to discuss a variety of broadcasting issues. The conditions of ownership of radio stations are laid down in the Broadcasting Acts 1990 and 1996 and the use of powers under that legislation is solely a matter for the Radio Authority.

School Sport

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans the Government have for encouraging sport in schools. [3188]

Mr. Banks: We are working to extend the opportunities for sport and physical recreation for all people by widening access and encouraging participation. Promoting physical education and sport in schools will be a key element of our strategy. A number of initiatives aimed at promoting sport in schools are already being taken forward by the English Sports Council, and we will shortly be meeting the Department for Education and Employment to consider further action.

National Academy for Sport

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage when the decision on the location of the National Academy for Sport is to be made. [3190]

Mr. Banks: I have visited the three short-listed sites and am now examining the bids in light of the visits. We will make an announcement of how we intend to proceed in due course.

Seaside Resorts

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to visit *(a)* Southport and *(b)* other north-west England seaside resorts. [3310]

Mr. Tom Clarke: I shall be visiting Southport on Wednesday 25 June to address the National Conference of the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management. I will be visiting north-west England again later in the year.

Coastal resorts are an important part of our heritage and account for some 44 per cent. of holiday spending in the United Kingdom. I am keen to see them build on this in the future so that local communities and businesses can share fully in the economic benefits of tourism.

Football

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will assess the advantages of permitting restricted standing room areas in new football grounds. [3809]

Mr. Banks: I believe we are striking the right balance in providing some of the most modern all-seater facilities in the world at our top clubs and allowing some standing accommodation at lower division grounds subject to stringent safety requirements. The Government is committed to delivering essential football ground safety improvements following the Taylor Report on the Hillsborough disaster. The £55 million funding package announced recently to assist the Football Trust with Taylor-related safety work demonstrates our commitment to this.

Television Licences

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how many letters have been received by his Department concerning concessionary television licences since 2 May; and what response he has given to such letters. [5070]

Mr. Fisher: Since 2 May, the Department of National Heritage has received 49 letters from hon. Members and 71 letters from members of the public about reduced-fee television licences. The Government accepts that the current concessionary scheme can give rise to anomalies and is not wholly satisfactory, and will continue to examine ways in which it might be improved, but has no plans at present to introduce any changes.

Tourism (Social Chapter)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will make a statement on the impact on the tourism industry of the United Kingdom adopting the social chapter. [3108]

Mr. Tom Clarke: Basic standards of employment, by creating a better rewarded and motivated work force, can help to improve business performance. Basic minimum standards will help improve competitiveness.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Water Charges

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on the use of council tax banding as the basis for water charges; [3844]

(2) if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on water metering; [3842]

(3) what plans he has for legislation to enable water companies to continue to base their charges on the rateable value of properties; and if he will make a statement. [3843]

Angela Eagle: Under Section 145 of the Water Industry Act 1991, water companies must not base their charges on the rateable value of property after 31 March 2000. The Deputy Prime Minister announced at the recent Water Summit that the Government is to review the system of charging for water. Among other issues this review will consider alternative bases of charging, including the future use of rateable values, the use of council tax bands and metering policy. We shall be looking at the way in which metering works at present, taking special account of the effect on low-income households. We have made clear our opposition to compulsory metering for essential household use.

Technetium 99 Contamination (West Cumbrian Coast)

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of recent British Nuclear Fuels monitoring figures in respect of the level of technetium 99 in crustaceans off the west Cumbrian coast; and what action he plans to take to eradicate the contamination. [4263]

Angela Eagle: Assessments of monitoring data of the levels of technetium 99 in crustaceans off the west Cumbrian coast are, in the first instance, matters for the Environment Agency and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. British Nuclear Fuels plc has applied to the Environment Agency for variations to the certificates of authorisation under the Radioactive Substances Act 1993 for the Sellafield site. These include a proposed reduction in the discharge limit for technetium 99. The Environment Agency is currently considering the applications and will shortly issue for public consultation the changes to the authorisations that it is minded to grant.

Housing (Improvements)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many properties underwent works through home improvement agencies in each of the last three years. [4292]

Mr. Raynsford: The table shows the number of jobs completed in the last three years by home improvement agencies in England funded by my Department:

Year	*Number of jobs*
1994–95	21,735
1995–96	24,129
1996–97	27,137

Some properties benefited from more than one job but information about the number of properties receiving works is not kept.

Playing Fields

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to prevent the disposal for development of playing fields owned by *(a)* local authorities, *(b)* companies and *(c)* other bodies. [4478]

Mr. Raynsford: Under current legislation local authorities only need the consent of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to a disposal of land at less than open market value. However, the Government intends to ensure that those playing fields which schools and their communities need are not sold in future. My right hon. Friends, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and the Secretary of State for National Heritage are discussing this as a matter of urgency, looking at a wide range of options.

Green Ministers

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the Green Ministers appointed to date in other Government departments; and what guidance has been produced by his Department on the role to be played by Green Ministers. [4305]

Angela Eagle: The Ministerial Committee on the Environment has been set up to consider environmental policy issues with the following membership:

Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Chairman)

Chancellor of the Exchequer

Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

President of the Board of Trade and Secretary of State for Trade and Industry

Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

Secretary of State for Scotland

Secretary of State for Health

President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons

Secretary of State for National Heritage

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

Secretary of State for Wales

Secretary of State for International Development

Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Lords

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

Minister of Transport

Chief Secretary, Treasury

Minister of State, Department of the Environment and Transport

Minister without Portfolio.

The Secretary of State for Social Security also receives the papers. She and other Ministers are invited to attend as necessary.

We are still in the process of appointing Green Ministers and a further announcement will be made once they have been established.

English Partnerships

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each region the amount of money spent by English Partnerships in each of the last three financial years. [4608]

Angela Eagle: English Partnerships' expenditure by region on its development programme, excluding expenditure on the Greenwich Peninsula, in the last three financial years is as follows:

£ million

Region	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
North-east	47.7	34.3	31.8
North-west	52.9	52.0	50.4
Yorkshire and Humberside	43.8	55.0	40.5
Midlands	63.4	58.0	67.8
South-east	10.3	25.6	36.0
South-west	7.3	11.8	8.5
Total	225.4	236.7	235.0

Natterjack Toad

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the sites designated as the natural habitat of the natterjack toad. [4593]

Ms Angela Eagle: Fifty sites have been designated for the natterjack toad in Great Britain. A list giving details of these has been placed in the Library.

Leasehold Land

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the advantages of increasing protection for home owners in flats whose property lies on leasehold land. [3126]

Mr. Raynsford: We are committed to simplifying the current rules restricting the purchase of freeholds by leaseholders when a suitable legislative opportunity arises. We will consult on our proposals in due course. Meanwhile, we will lay before the House shortly Orders to implement the provisions of the Housing Act 1996 which will transfer jurisdiction for determining disputes over service charges to Leasehold Valuation Tribunals.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide a Keeling schedule in respect of the relevant sections of

(a) the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and *(b)* other Acts amended by the Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit approvals) Bill. [5123]

Mr. Raynsford: We do not propose to add such a schedule to the Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill. However, the following sets out the text of section 55(3) of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 as it would be if amended by Clause 1 of the Bill, and the text of section 54(5) of that Act as it would be if amended by Clause 2 of the Bill:

Section 55

(3) In determining the amount of a basic credit approval, the Secretary of State shall not take account of capital receipts to the extent that the authority concerned are required to set aside the receipts as provision for credit liabilities; and in determining the amount of a basic credit approval or a supplementary credit approval, the Secretary of State or other Minister shall not take account of capital receipts to the extent that they are applied or paid as mentioned in subsections (7) to (9) of section 59 below.

Section 54

(5) In the case of a supplementary credit approval issued in respect of expenditure which is treated by the authority concerned as expenditure for capital purposes by virtue only of direction sunder section 40(6) above, the approval may specify an amortisation period.

Departmental Land

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action his Department is taking to monitor the disposal of land by other Government Departments for compliance with the terms of local development plans, with particular reference to the National Physical Laboratory site at Teddington. [4587]

Mr. Raynsford: Any Crown body wishing to secure planning permission for land prior to its disposal must apply for permission under section 299 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. As with applications for planning permission from non-Crown bodies, it is for the local planning authority to determine the application. Such determination shall be in accordance with the development plan for the area, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Other than where the matter is expressly referred to the Secretary of State—e.g. under the Town and Country Planning (Development Plans and Consultation) Directions 1992, or on appeal—my Department is not concerned with the specific proposals of other Government Departments to dispose of their land, nor the proposed use of any such land. The National Physical Laboratory is within the London Borough of Richmond, and the Unitary Development Plan policy for the site is for employment uses. We understand that no planning application has been made to the planning authority in respect of the site.

Airports

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the cost of constructing a 1,400 metre runway in the south-east of England; and what costs would be incurred by the construction of a 2,000 metre runway. [4471]

Ms Jackson: No assessment has been made of the costs of runway construction, which would vary greatly depending on the site chosen.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the time required to *(a)* construct and *(b)* bring into operation a new runway in south-east England. [4474]

Ms Jackson: The time required for constructing a new runway and bringing it into operation would depend on the nature of the particular proposal and on the planning procedures followed.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will reintroduce traffic distribution rules; and what plans he has to direct charter services to specific airports in the London area. [4473]

Ms Jackson: Traffic distribution rules remain in place at Heathrow and Gatwick which prevent all-cargo services and general aviation from using the airport at peak periods. There are no plans to reintroduce them for scheduled and charter services. In any case, powers do not exist to direct services to an airport—only to exclude them.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to address problems relating to runway capacity in the south-east of England. [4539]

Ms Jackson: Work has been under way since February 1995 to assess the implications of runway capacity enhancement at Heathrow and the feasibility of a close parallel runway at Gatwick. When completed, these studies will help to inform the assessment by Ministers of all available options.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the extra slots made available at Heathrow by the proposed BA/AA alliance will be allocated to services to regional airports. [4401]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: I have been asked to reply.

The previous President of the Board of Trade announced on 6 December 1996 that he intended to refer the proposed alliance between British Airways and American Airlines to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, unless suitable undertakings were given by the parties to the alliance. He took the view that, without such undertakings, the alliance would be likely to lead to a significant loss of actual and potential competition on air routes between the UK and the US. He asked the Director General of Fair Trading to seek appropriate undertakings from the parties, and also to consider views from all interested third parties on the undertakings and other conditions which he proposed. The proposed undertakings and conditions included the release by the alliance of up to 168 take-off and landing slots at Heathrow. These slots were to be made available for use by competitor airlines only on transatlantic services, in order to ensure that the slot release addressed the competition concerns raised by the alliance.

My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade has not yet made a decision on the proposed alliance. The Office of Fair Trading and the Department of Trade and Industry are still considering the case in consultation with the European Commission.

Red Routes (London)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans for red routes in London. [4720]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The red route programme delivers improved conditions for all road users by making effective use of the road space while taking into account the needs of those who live and work along the route. I have no plans to vary the red route network although I shall naturally consider individual representations on their merits. I intend to look at how these improvements can be further enhanced, giving particular attention to what can be done to assist buses, cyclists and pedestrians. The timetable for completion of the network will be reviewed, along with all other expenditure programmes, as part of our Comprehensive Spending Review.

Footpaths and Bridleways

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons notice was not given to the statutory consultees under the Transport and Works Act about the proposed closure of footpaths and bridleways for the proposed Welsh Highland Railway Order; and if he will place a copy of his reply to the Ramblers Association concerning these issues in the Library. [4590]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The promoters of the proposed Order, the Ffestiniog Railway Company, consider that the Transport and Works Act applications rules were complied with in respect of the placing of notices and serving of documents on statutory consultees. However, in the light of representations made by the Ramblers Association and others, they have agreed to put up notices and serve documents in respect of all footpaths affected by the Order as if they were public rights of way for the purposes of the rules. Persons who wish to object to the proposals relating to footpaths will have a further six weeks in which to lodge such objection in writing with the Secretary of State. A copy of the Department's reply to the Ramblers Association will be placed in the Library.

Radioactive Materials (Transportation)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to improve safety standards for the transportation of (i) nuclear waste and (ii) spent nuclear fuel. [4639]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 20 June]:* The safety standards for the transport of nuclear waste and spent nuclear fuel are already extremely high. They are based upon the recommendations of the International Atomic Energy Agency and are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that the excellent safety record is maintained. The Government is active in and will continue to support the work of the international Atomic Energy Authority and the other international bodies that regulate the carriage of radioactive material, such as the International Maritime Organisation, the International Civil Aviation Organisation, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (for road transport) and the Intergovernmental Organisation for International Carriage by Rail.

South West Trains (Bicycles)

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will seek to ensure that South West Trains retain space for the carriage of bicycles when renewing their rolling stock. [5088]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Mr. Whitehead) on 16 June, *Official Report*, column *41*.

Pilotage (Thames River)

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what consultations he has had with the Port of London Authority over their proposals to relax pilotage regulations along the Thames. [5008]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Port of London Authority has informed my Department that it is reviewing its pilotage directions. There is no requirement for harbour authorities to consult the Secretary of State before issuing new directions but they have a duty to consult those operating in their harbour. I understand that the Port of London Authority intends to do this once its proposals are finalised.

Railways (Ticket Machines)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will ensure that automatic train ticket machines have facilities for accepting railcards held by disabled people; and what progress his Department has made in pursuing this matter with the office of the Rail Regulator in relation to its code of practice. [4087]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We will be looking at this in the context of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. We will also ask the Rail Regulator to consider expanding the advice in his Code of Practice, which already includes design guidance on ticket machines, to address this point.

Ports

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from smaller trust ports on the anti-competitive action of larger ports; what response he has made; and if he will make a statement. [4662]

Ms Glenda Jackson: No such representations have been received.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to encourage the remaining trust ports to become private companies. [4663]

Ms Jackson: We will consider on their merits any privatisation schemes put forward by trust port authorities. Where a scheme is approved in principle, our officials

will provide advice to the authority on carrying out the privatisation in accordance with the provisions of the Ports Act 1991.

PRIME MINISTER

Earth Summit 2

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the outcome of the Earth summit 2 conference. [4800]

The Prime Minister: I will make a statement on my return.

Polygraphs

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Prime Minister what use the security services make of the polygraph; and if he will make a statement. [4586]

The Prime Minister: The Security and Intelligence Services make no use of the polygraph and have no plans to do so.

Food Poisoning

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Prime Minister which Government departments and agencies are involved in the examination of E. coli. [3607]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* The following Government departments and agencies are involved in the examination of E. coli:

Departments

Department of Health

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

Department for the Environment and Transport

Department of Health and Social Services—Northern Ireland

Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland

Welsh Office

Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department

Scottish Office Department of Health

Agencies

Veterinary Laboratories Agency

Central Science Laboratory

Public Health Laboratory (Northern Ireland)

Public Health Laboratory Service (England and Wales)

The Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health

Environment Agency

Drinking Water Inspectorate.

Ministerial Residences

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Prime Minister how much public money is budgeted for expenditure on refurbishing official residences occupied by Ministers. [3710]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* This is a matter for individual Boards of Trustees or Departments.

Devolution (Referendums)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Prime Minister how many requests he has received from current residents of Colchester, born in Scotland or Wales, who want to vote in the Scottish and Welsh devolution referendums. [4035]

The Prime Minister: I have received a number of representatives on this issue. It is not possible to identify the information as requested.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Uranium Fuel

Mr. Flynn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what tonnage of spent uranium fuel elements was discharged in each of the past 10 years from (1) magnox reactors, (2) advanced gas-cooled reactors, (3) pressurised water reactors and (4) fast reactors; and what in each case were the *(a)* initial uranium enrichment, *(b)* initial plutonium content, *(c)* initial fissile plutonium content and *(d)* the spent fuel burn-up rate. [1843]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 2 June 1997]:* Information relating to the majority of tonnage of spent nuclear fuel discharged from various reactors during the last 10 years is kept by the private sector operator (British Energy). Information as far as the public sector is concerned, in respect of Magnox Electric reactors, Calder Hall and Chapelcross (operated by BNFL) and Dounreay (operated by UKAEA), in each of the last 10 years, is not readily available in the format required and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Low Pay

Mr. Tom King: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time employees of her Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3 an hour. [4192]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The Department employs no staff with an hourly rate of pay less than £3.50. It employs a total of 100 staff paid at less than £4 an hour. Of these 12 work part-time. Part-time staff are paid at the same annual rate of pay as full-time staff.

Retail Petrol Industry

Mr. Moss: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) for what reasons the Director General of Fair Trading did not meet the undertaking given to the Trade and Industry Committee in 1996 that the quadrennial review of the retail petrol industry would be brought forward to early 1997; [3838]

(2) what are the terms of reference for the quadrennial review of the retail petrol industry to be undertaken by the Director General of Fair Trading; and if she will make a statement. [3839]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: I am informed that, following the Trade and Industry Select Committee hearing on 16 December 1996, the Office of Fair Trading did in fact start preliminary work on the review in January. They commenced the review itself in April, as the Director General of Fair Trading stated in his recent press notice.

The review is focusing on the key indicators identified by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission in their 1990 report on the supply of petrol: market structure, profitability and prices. It is also looking at the longer-term market trends to see whether it is possible to draw any conclusions about the future competitiveness of the market and whether it will continue to operate to the benefit of consumers.

Oil Exploration Licences

Mr. Dafis: To ask the President of the Board of Trade under what circumstances she has the power to suspend oil exploration licences issued in the 17th round; and what would be the impact on public funds of such action. [3849]

Mr. Battle: There is no provision in the United Kingdom's petroleum licensing legislation for the suspension of production licences such as those awarded in the 17th Seaward Round. The circumstances in which 17th Round licences can be revoked are set out in Schedule 4 to the Petroleum (Production) (Seaward Areas) Regulations 1988 as amended.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Dafis: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will provide increased support for *(a)* solar energy and *(b)* other renewable energy technologies. [3018]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke on Trent, North (Ms Walley) on 10 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *417*.

Wind Power

Mr. William Ross: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many wind power generating farms there are in the United Kingdom; how many machines they contain; and how many of the blades she estimates have been broken in each of the last 10 years. [4049]

Mr. Battle: At 18 June 1997, there were 43 windfarms, each comprising three or more turbines, operating in the UK, totalling 740 turbines in all. My Department does not maintain records of broken wind turbine blades.

Dounreay (Contamination)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what notification she has received from the Atomic Energy Authority management at Dounreay in respect of their plans to clean up radioactive particles from the beaches close to the plant; and if she will consult the National Radiological Project Board on its recent radiological assessment of beaches near to Dounreay. [3819]

Mr. Battle: The UKAEA has kept my Department fully informed of their plans for dealing with the Dounreay beach particles. The UKAEA is conducting an extensive search to find the source of these particles. Meanwhile it continues to monitor local beaches removing any particles it finds.

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), the independent environmental regulator, recently commissioned the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) to undertake a survey of the beach at Sandside Bay near Dounreay following discovery of a particle there by UKAEA during routine monitoring. No further particles were detected.

Patenting of Animals

Mr. Flynn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations she has received concerning the patenting of animals; and if she will make a statement. [3227]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* I am replying because my department has overall responsibility for intellectual property policy. My department has received one representation from Compassion in World Farming concerning a proposal from the European Commission on the patenting of biotechnological inventions. I understand that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has also received a representation from Compassion in World Farming concerning the patenting of animals.

Solar Power

Mr. Frank Cook: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what factors underlie the allocation of funding by her Department to the promotion of *(a)* the oil and gas industry and *(b)* the deployment of solar power in Britain. [4443]

Mr. John Battle: *(a)* The DTI sponsors the UK companies which supply goods and services to the oil, gas and petrochemicals industry in the UK and abroad. Funds are directed at actions to increase the technological capability and international competitiveness of these supplier companies and to promote exports.

(b) The DTI sponsors the new and renewable energy industry, which encompasses solar energy. In line with our manifesto commitment to undertake a new and strong drive to develop renewable energy sources, I recently announced a review of policy including considerations of what would be necessary and practicable to achieve 10 per cent. of UK's electricity needs by the year 2010, and how renewables, including solar, can make an effective contribution to meeting requirements for future greenhouse gas reduction commitments. In the meantime, the Government's new and renewable energy programme, currently under way, will continue.

The Government will be considering the balance of activities within the spending plans it inherited to ensure that they reflect the Government's priorities, through the Comprehensive Spending Review, announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 11 June 1997.

Mr. Cook: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the number of jobs which could result from the development and widespread use of solar power in Britain. [4441]

Mr. Battle: My Department has not yet made any assessment of this kind. The current estimate of the number of people working directly on photovoltaics in the UK is around 250 and on active solar heating it is 160.

Mr. Cook: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what measures her Department is undertaking to ensure that *(a)* its own and *(b)* other suitable Government buildings are fitted with solar photovoltaic panels. [4386]

Mr. Battle: Continuing energy savings targets require that departments consider and implement means of reducing energy consumption. The use of photovoltaic cells is one method that departments and their professional advisers consider in seeking to reduce the amount of electricity supplied from the grid to buildings they are responsible for.

At the time of the refurbishment of the DTI Headquarter's Building at 1 Victoria Street and the designing of the Department of Environment's new Headquarter's building Eland House, thorough cost-benefit analyses of the potential for utilising PV were carried out. In the light of those analyses, it was decided that it would not be cost-effective to install PV modules in either building. Cost-benefit analyses typically consider the life cycle costings and total energy consumption for an installation.

Mr. Cook: To ask the President of the Board of Trade pursuant to her recent speech, (1) what measures her Department is undertaking to promote the use of solar power; [4385]

(2) what measures apart from the Scholar Programme her Department is undertaking to increase the use of solar electric power in *(a)* homes and *(b)* offices; [4440]

(3) what measures her Department is undertaking to create a market in Britain for the British solar photovoltaic industry. [4442]

Mr. Battle: I announced on 6 June, *Official Report* column *273*, a review of Government policy on new and renewable energy including looking at all aspects of its support for solar energy. In the meantime my Department's New and Renewable Energy Programme, which includes work on solar energy, will continue.

Also, in addition to the SCOLAR programme under the Technology Foresight initiative, the Office of Science and Technology funds a programme of basic and applied research into solar energy, including photovoltaics, through the Engineering and Physical Science Research Council.

Transco (Price Controls)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Presidents of the Board of Trade when she expects to make a decision on the Monopolies and Mergers Commission inquiry into price controls on Transco. [4392]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The Director General of Gas Supply published the MMC report on 18 June. Under the provisions of the Gas Act 1986, it is her responsibility to respond to the MMC's conclusions.

Airlines (Alliance)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to make a decision on the proposed alliance between British Airways and American Airlines. [4387]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The UK competition authorities are currently considering the proposed alliance between British Airways and American Airlines, in consultation with the European Commission. It is not the practice of my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade to comment publicly on the timing or substance of competition cases in which she will be responsible for making a decision.

Travel Industry

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to receive the report from the Monopolies and Mergers Commission on vertical integration in the travel trade. [4390]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) report on foreign package holidays is due to be delivered to my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade on 6 November 1997.

Beer Companies (Merger)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to make a decision on the proposed merger between Bass and Carlsberg Tetley. [4389]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) report on the proposed merger between Bass and Carlsberg-Tetley will be published as quickly as is practicable. I cannot comment on the likely publication date of the MMC report or its contents, since this information is market sensitive. Copies of the report will be laid before Parliament at the same time as it is published.

Electrical Goods

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to make a decision on the inquiry into the alleged price fixing of electrical goods. [4391]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) report on domestic electrical goods will be published as quickly as is practicable. I cannot comment on the likely publication date of the MMC report or its contents, since this information is market sensitive. Copies of the report will be laid before Parliament at the same time as it is published.

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will include an assessment of public opinion on the operation of manufacturers' recommended retail prices in her consideration of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission report into the electrical goods industry. [4602]

Mr. Griffiths: The report remains confidential until publication. I am not able to comment until then.

Electricity Industry (Competition)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what discussions she has had with the Director General of Offer over the timetable for the introduction of competition in the domestic electricity market. [4396]

Mr. Battle: I have had discussions with the Director General on many of the strategic issues on the 1998 electricity supply market liberalisation. At my request, he made a report on the current status of the programme of work, and his proposals for future progress to a timely and successful conclusion. PA Consulting, the Overall Programme Managers for the electricity market liberalisation, also produced a report. Both of these reports were published on 29 May. Recently, the Director

General and I met the Chief Executives of the Public Electricity Suppliers and the Electricity Pool to discuss the practical implementation of the proposals. It was agreed that the Director General's proposals should be accepted as the basis to take the programme forward.

Recommended Retail Price Scheme

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what public consultations she has held in respect of the future of the recommended retail price scheme; and if she will make a statement. [4601]

Mr. Griffiths: My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade has held no public consultations in respect of the future of the recommended retail price scheme.

The Government plans, as part of its reform of competition law, to replace the Resale Prices Act 1976 with a tough prohibition approach to deal with anti-competitive agreements, practices and behaviour. There will be a consultation process over the summer before a Competition Bill is introduced in the autumn.

Pembroke Power Station (Orimulsion)

Mr. Page: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to announce her decision on the National Power application to convert the Pembroke power station to orimulsion. [4592]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade has called for a public inquiry to be held into the application.

Arrangements for the inquiry are currently in hand and the date, time, venue and the statement of matters which she considers relevant to her consideration of the application will be announced in due course.

ISDN Telephone Lines

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she will next have discussions with the Director General of Oftel regarding the cost of installing ISDN telephone lines; and if she will evaluate the costs of installing lines in the United Kingdom relative to those in Europe. [4733]

Mr. Battle: The pricing of ISDN is a matter for Oftel. Oftel reviewed ISDN prices in 1996 and as a result BT provided more flexible connection pricing arrangements in October of that year for basic rate ISDN (ISDN 2). Although BT's connection charges are high compared with our European neighbours, recent benchmarking studies have shown that the monthly rental and call charges are both very competitive, which means that the overall annual cost of using ISDN in the UK is one of the most competitive in the world.

Nuclear Material

Mr. Baker: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what were the volumes of *(a)* low-level nuclear material, *(b)* medium-level nuclear material and *(c)* high-level nuclear material which were (i) imported into and (ii) exported from Great Britain for each year from 1980 to 1996. [4648]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 20 June 1997]:* Approximately 3,507 tonnes of spent fuel, which is categorised as high-level nuclear material, from overseas is currently held in the UK, after which the majority of the nuclear material will be reprocessed and exported to the country of origin.

The volumes of nuclear material for the whole of the UK cover many thousands of import and export transactions every year, and involve other nuclear materials such as isotopes for hospitals, industry, and academic institutions. The data requested, in respect of all these transactions covering each year from 1980 to 1996, could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Baker: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the countries in 1996 (i) from which Britain imported *(a)* nuclear fuel, *(b)* spent nuclear fuel and *(c)* nuclear waste and (ii) to which Britain exported (1) nuclear fuel, (2) spent nuclear fuel and (3) nuclear waste. [4649]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 20 June 1997]:* In 1996, (i) Britain imported *(a)* nuclear fuel from Germany, France and Belgium *(b)* spent fuel from Japan, Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands and Australia *(c)* no nuclear waste and (ii) exported (1) nuclear fuel to Indonesia, Netherlands, France, Germany, Canada, Australia (2) spent nuclear fuel to France, and (3) no nuclear waste.

Mr. Baker: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what the estimated volume is of *(a)* high-level nuclear material, *(b)* medium-level nuclear material and *(c)* low-level nuclear material currently in Great Britain. [4645]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 20 June 1997]:* The volumes of undisposed radioactive waste in stock and predicted to arise in the UK are routinely reported in the UK Radioactive Waste Inventory, published by Nirex Limited, a copy of which is available in the Library of the House. Based on the latest update, provided by Nirex, together in the 1994 Inventory, and assuming uniform rates of future arisings the estimated volumes of waste in stock on 1 April 1997 are:

(i) high-level: 2,000m^3

(ii) intermediate-level: 74,000m^3

(iii) low-level: [1]8,000m^3

[1]Low-level waste is routinely disposed of to Drigg and hence it has been assumed that the vast majority of arisings, between 1994 and 1997, have been disposed of.

Calculating the total of all nuclear materials currently in the UK, which would include industry, hospitals and academic institutions, could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Nuclear Industry (US Representations)

Mr. Baker: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations the Government have received, since 1 May, from the United States Government concerning the nuclear industry; and what discussions between representatives of the two Governments have taken place on this issue. [4644]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 20 June 1997]:* My Department has received no specific representations from the US Government on nuclear issues since 1 May 1997.

My officials have had discussions with representatives of the US Government with whom they maintain regular contact on both a bilateral and multilateral basis. These discussions have covered a range of issues of continuing mutual interest, including disposition of surplus US and Russian fissile materials; verification of nuclear materials; management of decommissioning; nuclear transport; the international liability regime; fusion research; and nuclear safety in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union including preparations for the discussions on these issues at the Summit of the Eight at Denver on 20–22 June.

Dixons

Mr. Cousins: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will investigate the timing of sales of shares in Dixons. [5109]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: It is the Department's longstanding policy not to discuss the affairs of individual companies.

My Department takes seriously its role in the investigation of any misconduct, and is always keen to receive any information which might assist in deciding if enquiries are needed.

If the hon. Member has any information which he feels ought to be brought to my attention, he should do so as soon as possible.

Gas Industry (Competition)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what discussion she has had with the Director General of Ofgas over the establishment of criteria for effective competition in the domestic gas market; and if she will make a statement. [4394]

Mr. Battle: The Government consider that the extension of competition on as wide a basis as possible is in the interests of gas consumers. The securing of effective competition is a part of the Director General's statutory duties, and it is for her as an independent regulator to decide how to interpret and achieve that duty.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects Ofgas to announce the next phases of gas competition. [4393]

Mr. Battle: I understand that the Director General of Gas Supply intends to issue proposals for consultation shortly.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Adult Education (Funding)

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement about the future funding of adult education. [3276]

Dr. Howells: Under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, statutory responsibility for securing the adequate provision of adult further education is divided between local education authorities—which are responsible for the more informal adult further education courses in their areas—and the Further Education Funding Council—which is responsible for those courses described in the Act under schedule 2 as having national significance, such as basic skills course, access courses and those which lead to academic or vocational qualifications.

My right hon. Friend recently announced that Professor Bob Fryer will chair a national advisory group on adult learning to advise on all issues relating to adult learning.

Welfare-to-work Programme

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what employment or training initiatives the Government plans to introduce under the welfare-to-work programme for those who have been unemployed for less than six months. [4376]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Our current priority is the introduction of the New Deal for young people out of work for six months or more. Help will continue to be available immediately to all those who become unemployed.

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the proposed locations of the Government's welfare-to-work projects; and what criteria govern these decisions. [4579]

Mr. Howarth: Our New Deal for young and long-term unemployed people will operate throughout the United Kingdom. All unemployed people who are eligible will have a chance to participate in this initiative, which is designed to help them from welfare into sustained employment as quickly as possible.

Drugs

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the total amount *(a)* spent and *(b)* allocated by his Department on tackling problems relating to drugs in respect of (i) developing prevention publicity, education and community action and (ii) improving treatment and rehabilitation, for (1) 1994, (2) 1995, (3) 1996 and (4) 1997. [4797]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on total Government and individual Departments' expenditure on tackling drug misuse is not recorded on an annual basis. The most recently available estimates were published in the White Paper "Tackling Drugs Together" in May 1995. They show that at least £526 million of expenditure in 1993–94 could be directly attributable to drug programmes and activities across the UK.

The Government will be appointing a "drug czar" to co-ordinate action against drugs, working to the President of the Council as Chair of the Cabinet's co-ordinating committee on drug misuse. One of his/her first tasks will be to review urgently the existing drugs strategy, and to put forward proposals for tackling the problem with renewed vigour. This review will include current Government expenditure.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what research has been commissioned by his Department to identify the level of drug abuse at each level of the education system. [5089]

Ms Morris: A good deal of research is available on levels of drug abuse which, while not necessarily commissioned by my Department, is taken into account when planning initiatives to support drug education in schools.

My Department did provide funding for an evaluation of The Advisory Council for Alcohol and Drug Education's—TACADE's—"Skills for Life" PSE programme for secondary schools, which had a particular emphasis on drug education. This included research into students' experience of drugs and the level of reported drug taking by students in a small sample of schools, as well as an in-depth study of how those schools were implementing the programme. A report will be published shortly. In addition, my Department has recently produced a booklet outlining the results of the independent evaluation reports of a number of LEA innovative drug education projects supported by our Grants for Education Support and Training—GEST—programme in 1995–96. These projects researched and trailled a range of different approaches to drug education work. A copy is in the Library.

Early Excellence Centres

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment where he proposes to site the 25 early excellence centres; and on what criteria his judgment as to their location will be based. [4578]

Ms Estelle Morris: We shall invite proposals for a national pilot programme of early excellence centres. We are considering the criteria for centres, and will make an announcement soon.

Assisted Places

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received about primary aged children in receipt of an assisted place who will lose assisted status at the age of 11 years. [4744]

Mr. Byers: I have received correspondence from bodies representing schools offering assisted places to primary age children, and from others, about the phasing out of the assisted places scheme.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils residing in the Colchester parliamentary constituency benefit from an assisted place. [5005]

Mr. Byers: Information about the constituency area from which assisted pupils originate is not collected centrally. There are no schools participating in the assisted places scheme in the Colchester constituency.

Class Sizes

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the average class size in state sector education in *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales, *(c)* Scotland, *(d)* Northern Ireland and *(e)* the United Kingdom for the most recent year for which he has figures. [4589]

Mr. Byers: The available information on average class sizes is shown in the table.

Average class sizes[1,2]: 1995–96

	One teacher classes		*All classes*[3]	
	Primary	*Secondary*	*Primary*	*Secondary*
United Kingdom	[4]—	[4]—	27.0	[5]21.6
England	27.3	21.7	27.5	21.9
Wales	[4]—	[4]—	25.9	20.2
Scotland	[4]—	[4]—	24.8	19.5
Northern Ireland	24.1	[4]—	24.1	—

[1] Data on class sizes was collected at different times of the academic year in the different countries: January 1996 for England and Wales, September 1995 for Scotland and October 1995 for Northern Ireland.

[2] In Northern Ireland, for data collection purposes, a class is defined as a group of pupils normally in the charge of one teacher.

[3] "All classes" figures include classes where more than one teacher may be present.

[4] Not available.

[5] Great Britain only.

Passive Smoking

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to raise awareness in schools of the dangers of passive smoking. [5084]

Ms Estelle Morris: Education about the harmful effects of smoking remains a statutory requirement as part of National Curriculum science. The Department has issued guidance to schools on their contribution towards ensuring that pupils are made aware of all the health risks associated with smoking, including passive smoking; and to teachers on addressing smoking within the school curriculum and on appropriate smoking education materials.

Teacher Education

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans to improve initial teacher education. [5072]

Ms Estelle Morris: I hope to be announcing new requirements for courses of initial teacher training later this week.

White Paper

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will publish an Education White Paper. [4891]

Mr. Byers: A White Paper setting out the Government's agenda for raising standards in schools will be published in early July.

Specialist Schools

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the criteria will be for the next round of applications for specialist schools. [4892]

Ms Estelle Morris: The new criteria will retain the benefits of the existing arrangements but will include an emphasis on collaboration with other schools and the wider community. We expect that revised criteria will be available to schools during July.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what resources he plans to provide to ensure that sports specialist schools in the state education system develop into a network. [4893]

Ms Morris: The resources for specialist sports colleges, as with all programmes, will be considered as part of the Department's review of its spending plans.

State Schools

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the total value of balances held by state schools in England. [5066]

Mr. Byers: Balances carried forward at the end of the financial year 1995–96 by county, voluntary and special schools maintained by LEAs in England are provisionally estimated by the Department to have amounted in total to about £580 million. These figures are derived from the LMS outturn statements published by LEAs under section 122 of the Education Act 1996—formerly section 42 of the Education Reform Act 1988—and represent surpluses net of any deficits.

The financial monitoring of schools in the grant-maintained sector is the responsibility of the Funding Agency for Schools, and I have asked the Chairman of the Funding Agency to arrange for a reply to be sent to the hon. Member in respect of the sector.

HEALTH

Brachial Plexus Injuries

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if all health authorities record the incidence of brachial plexus injuries. [4047]

Ms Jowell: Information is collected on the number of babies admitted to hospital with a primary diagnosis of brachial plexus injuries. The number of babies with brachial plexus injuries diagnosed at birth who are not readmitted to hospital is not known.

Smoking

Mr. Barron: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish the 1996 smoking prevalence data. [4507]

Ms Jowell: It is planned to publish as follows:

(i) preliminary results from the 1996–97 General Household Survey including smoking prevalence for adults, during autumn 1997;

(ii) "Smoking Among Secondary Schoolchildren in 1996", later this year.

Dental Services (Wiltshire)

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the money allocated to the Wiltshire health authority from the general dental service access fund 1996–97 has been allocated to dental practices in the health authority region; how it has been distributed; and to what extent this funding has satisfied the criteria set out in the bid. [4790]

Mr. Milburn: Yes. The funding is being used to meet the aims identified in the health authority's bid.

Private Medical Insurance (Tax Relief)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of the impact on NHS *(a)* costs and *(b)* receipts from private medical insurers if tax relief on private medical insurance for the over-60s were removed; [5081]

(2) what assessment he has made of the potential impact on NHS waiting lists as a result of increased demand if tax relief on private medical insurance for the over 60s were removed. [5108]

Mr. Milburn: None.

Funding Formula

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the market forces factor in the NHS funding allocation formula; and what weight he will attach to representations submitted to his Department by *(a)* Leeds Community Health Council and *(b)* others. [5291]

Mr. Milburn: We will look at how resources are distributed across both secondary and primary care, to ensure that these fully reflect local population needs and operate as fairly as possible.

We will consider all representations received.

Accident and Emergency Departments

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the average waiting times at accident and emergency departments at the Royal Free Hospital, Whittington, Homerton, Royal London and the North Middlesex; and if he will make a statement. [4410]

Mr. Milburn: The Department does not currently collect information on average waiting times in accident and emergency departments.

Information is collected on the Patient's Charter standards for immediate assessment in accident and emergency, which is published annually in the NHS Performance Tables; and admission to a hospital bed through accident and emergency by health authority.

We understand from the health authorities concerned that the percentages of patients needing hospital admission through accident and emergency who were admitted within two hours and four hours for the three months to 31 March 1997 were as set out in the table.

Hospital	*Percentage of patients admitted within two hours*	*Percentage of patients admitted within four hours*
The Royal Free Hospital	56.8	83.9
Whittington	32.0	69.0
Homerton	77.5	95.0
Royal London	87.2	98.5
North Middlesex	79.0	100.0

Source:
Health authorities' unpublished information.

Northwick Park and St. Mark's Hospital Trust

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what specific proposals have been put forward by the Northwick Park and St. Mark's Hospital Trust to recover from its deficit; what targets his Department has set; and what progress has been made towards them. [4619]

Mr. Milburn: The trust has in place a recovery plan, jointly agreed with Brent and Harrow Health Authority and the NHS Executive, which includes a variety of measures to ensure that it achieves financial balance within a 2-year time scale. Progress has been made on this with the trust having identified just under £6 million savings for this year, predominately from non-clinical budgets. The NHS Executive will continue to monitor the situation.

Drugs and Medicines Spending

Ms Hodge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent in real terms on drugs and medicines by the NHS in each of the last 10 years. [5076]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested is shown in the table.

Total NHS spending on drugs

£ million

Year	*Family Health Services drugs*	*Hospital and Community Health service drugs*	*Total (Cash)*	*Total (Real)*
1986–87	1,378	318	1,696	2,619
1987–88	1,536	352	1,888	2,768
1988–89	1,744	380	2,124	2,919
1989–90	1,942	414	2,356	3,026
1990–91	2,080	460	2,540	3,021
1991–92	2,317	591	2,908	3,251
1992–93	2,641	643	3,284	3,523
1993–94	2,951	710	3,661	3,817
1994–95	3,230	764	3,994	4,091
1995–96	3,498	874	4,372	4,372

Please note that the real figures are given to a 1995–96 baseline.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Legal Profession (Recruitment)

33. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is his Department's policy concerning the recruitment of people to the legal profession from a wider variety of social backgrounds; and if he will make a statement. [3121]

Mr. Hoon: Recruitment to the legal profession is primarily a matter for the profession itself. Both the Bar Council and the Law Society have adopted policies designed to ensure that entrance to the profession is based on merit alone. The Government believes that opportunities in the legal profession should be open to those from the widest possible variety of social backgrounds.

Civil Aid Certificates

34. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what are the current rights of a non-assisted third party to challenge the issue of a civil aid certificate to a party in a proceeding; and if he will make a statement. [3122]

Mr. Hoon: It is open to anyone to make representations to the Legal Aid Board about the issue of a legal aid certificate in civil proceedings, in relation either the merits of the case or the financial eligibility of the applicant.

Crown Courts

35. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the administration of the Crown courts. [3123]

Mr. Hoon: Since April 1995, the administration of the Crown courts has been the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Court Service under the terms of the Framework Document for the Agency.

Magistracy

36. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals he has to ensure that the magistracy is representative of political opinions and ethnic balance. [3124]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor requires his Advisory Committees to draw candidates for the lay magistracy from a broad a spectrum of the community so as to ensure, as far as is possible, that those recommended for appointment broadly reflect the communities which they will serve. Both political affiliation and ethnic origin are taken into account.

Monmouth and Chepstow Magistrates Courts

37. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the future of Chepstow and Monmouth court house. [3125]

Mr. Hoon: I would refer my Hon. Friend to the written answer I gave to his question, on 12 June this year, *Official Report,* 12 June 1997, column *548.*

Magistrates Courts Committees

38. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department by what mechanism local magistrates courts committees consult *(a)* local authorities and *(b)* local hon. Members on proposals to merge benches of magistrates. [3127]

Mr. Hoon: Section 33 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997 provides that a magistrates courts committee may submit to the Lord Chancellor a draft order proposing changes to the petty sessional divisions, or PSDs, in its area. Section 34 of the Act requires a magistrates courts committee to consult all the magistrates of the affected benches and the relevant paying authority, before the Lord Chancellor may consider any application for change under section 33.

MCCs are not required to consult Members direct, although section 34 also requires that notices be placed in local newspapers and the local courthouses. In practice the vast majority of MCCs consult more extensively than the Act stipulates.

Marriage Support

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what evaluation he plans to make of the current pilot programme of marriage support projects. [4075]

Mr. Hoon: The main aim of the pilot programme is to identify the types of service which support marriage most effectively. All the projects include an element of monitoring and evaluation, and organisations are required to provide an interim report on progress to the end of the calendar year 1997, followed by a full evaluation on completion of the project.

The Department will assess the effectiveness of the pilot projects in terms of their achievement of specific aims and objectives, and their cost-effectiveness.

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what support he proposes to give to enable successful marriage support projects to continue once the current pilot programme has been completed. [4074]

Mr. Hoon: The Department's programme of marriage support projects started on 1 April 1997. The programme will run for a year, and it is too early yet to identify the successful projects. The results of the pilot programme will be one of the factors taken into account by my right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Chancellor in deciding on the future funding of marriage support projects.

Magistrates

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if records are kept which show in relation to lay justices and stipendiary magistrates *(a)* the average length of trials before them, *(b)* the average fines imposed by them and *(c)* the number of successful appeals from them. [5031]

Mr. Hoon: This information is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what criteria exist to enable comparisons between the performance of lay magistrates and stipendiary magistrates. [5033]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor's Department does not attempt to draw comparisons between the performance of judicial officers.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to require stipendiary magistrates to sit with lay justices. [5034]

Mr. Hoon: There are some situations, for example in the youth court and the family court, where either law or practice requires stipendiary magistrates to sit with lay justices. There are no current plans to add to these categories.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the savings in cost and time from appointing a higher proportion of stipendiary magistrates. [5035]

Mr. Hoon: No formal assessment has been made of the savings in cost and time which might result from appointing a higher proportion of stipendiary magistrates. The Study of Delay in the Criminal Justice System (the Narey Report), contained no specific cost-benefit analysis.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many of the justices of the peace in England are qualified barristers or solicitors. [5036]

Mr. Hoon: No records are kept of the numbers of justices of the peace who are qualified barristers or solicitors.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what percentage of the magistrates courts in England and Wales are equipped to cater for magistrates who are registered disabled. [5038]

Mr. Hoon: As magistrates court buildings are the responsibility of the local authorities this information is not centrally held. The design standards set down for magistrates courts since 1991 require the magistrates' entry into the courthouse and access to a proportion of the courtrooms to be suitable for wheelchairs. Provision is also made for loop induction systems to be provided for those with hearing impairments. Disabled toilet facilities are also provided within the magistrates' circulation area. Applications by local authorities for grant aid to adapt older magistrates courts to provide improved facilities for disabled users including magistrates are treated as high priority bids when allocating capital grant.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what percentage of magistrates in England and Wales are registered disabled. [5040]

Mr. Hoon: No records are kept for the percentage of magistrates in England and Wales who are registered disabled.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what percentage of *(a)* lay magistrates and *(b)* stipendiary magistrates are from an ethnic minority background. [5041]

Mr. Hoon: *(a)* a survey of the ethnic origin of lay magistrates was begun in February 1997 and the results are expected to be available in early October.

(b) 2 per cent. of stipendiary magistrates are from an ethnic minority background.

Mr. Malone: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will establish a working group to report on the quality of justice and the relative case disposal rate of lay justices and stipendiary magistrates. [5030]

Mr. Hoon: The working party on the role of the stipendiary magistracy reported in February 1996. There are no current plans to commission a further study.

Court Costs

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the average cost per day

to the Exchequer of *(a)* a Crown court, *(b)* a magistrates court with lay justices sitting and *(c)* a magistrates court with a stipendiary magistrate sitting. [5032]

Mr. Hoon: The Home Office "Model of Flows and Costs in the Criminal Justice Process" for 1995–96 shows the total cost excluding capital expenditure in the Crown Court was £202,544,937 and in the magistrates' courts for criminal matters was £257,885,498. The number of days sat in the Crown Court in 1996 was 90,956. The number of hours sat in the magistrates' courts in 1996 was 1,173,071. It is not possible to break this information down between lay and stipendiary magistrates.

Judicial Training

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to improve the *(a)* race and *(b)* gender awareness of (i) judges, (ii) stipendiary magistrates and (iii) lay justices. [5042]

Mr. Hoon: Judicial training is the responsibility of the Judicial Studies Board (JSB), which is a non-departmental governmental body. Following a major programme of seminars in ethnic minority awareness between 1994 and 1996 for circuit judges, recorders, assistant recorders, district judges and stipendiary magistrates, the JSB continues to include such training as part of induction training for newly appointed assistant recorders and deputy district judges. It has also held a number of sessions in both induction and continuation training on equal treatment, including gender awareness, and is considering how training in this area might be developed.

Lay magistrate training is delivered by magistrates courts committees but the JSB has a role in setting the syllabus. Lay magistrates already address the issue of equal treatment for all in the light of their judicial oath and the JSB has recently begun a study to identify the skills and knowledge required by lay magistrates to ensure equality of treatment for all who appear in their courts.

Legal Aid

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what percentage of persons charged with serious criminal offences in *(a)* 1994, *(b)* 1995 and *(c)* 1996 were legally aided. [5044]

Mr. Hoon: 96.6 per cent of those dealt with on indictment in the Crown Court in 1994 were legally aided. The figures for 1995 and 1996 were 96.0 per cent. and 95.3 per cent. respectively.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what percentage of legally aided persons in all criminal proceedings in *(a)* 1994, *(b)* 1995 and *(c)* 1996 received custodial sentences. [5045]

Mr. Hoon: This information is not held centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Justices Clerks

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many clerks and deputy clerks to justices there are in England and Wales; and how many of these are qualified solicitors or barristers. [5037]

Mr. Hoon: According to records held by the Justices Clerk Society there are 204 justices clerks in England and Wales. All are qualified barristers or solicitors. There are around 230 people who are designated as deputies for justices clerks. Of these some 30 are neither barristers nor solicitors.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if it is his practice to ensure that lay magistrates always sit with clerks who are qualified as solicitors or barristers. [5039]

Mr. Hoon: Under the provisions of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997, magistrates courts are local managed. Decisions on which clerk advises which bench are therefore taken locally. The qualifications required of clerks in magistrates courts are set out in the Justices' Clerks (Qualification of Assistants) Rules 1979.

Chief Stipendiary Magistrates

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the future of the office of chief stipendiary magistrate. [5043]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor hopes shortly to designate one of the metropolitan stipendiary magistrates to be chief metropolitan stipendiary magistrate in succession to Mr. Peter Badge.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if it is his policy to appoint future chief stipendiary magistrates from among existing stipendiary magistrates. [5029]

Mr. Hoon: Section 16(3) of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997 requires the Lord Chancellor to designate one of the metropolitan stipendiary magistrates to be the chief metropolitan stipendiary magistrate.

Judicial Appointments

Mr. Gunnell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to review the system for appointing judges. [3118]

Mr. Hoon: The Government proposes to consult later this year on the merits of a Judicial Appointments Commission and whether it should be established.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Integrated Schools

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will ensure that when an integrated school is established in an area, funds are not reduced for other local schools. [3342]

Mr. Worthington: A key principle of the local management of schools arrangements is that a large part of a school's budget is determined largely by the enrolment. If the take-up of places in new grant-maintained schools affect the enrolments in other schools, it could also have implications for the budgets of those schools which will, of course, then have lower running costs.

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will provide additional funding in the next financial year to encourage the establishment of integrated schools. [3343]

Mr. Worthington: In the coming months I intend to review, in consultation with relevant interests, the present approach to the establishment of integrated schools to determine how best to encourage the development of this sector. It is too early to say how much, if any, additional funding will be made available next year.

Bed Blocking

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many hospital patients *(a)* in Northern Ireland and *(b)* in the Ulster, North Down and Ards Trust, assessed as ready for institutional care in the community, are currently bed blocking; and if she will make a statement on the factors underlying the bed blocking. [3830]

Mr. Worthington: This information is not collected on a routine basis. However, recent surveys carried out be the four health and social services boards indicated that there were some 127 hospital patients who had been assessed as needing either residential or nursing home care and who had been waiting more than two weeks while arrangements were being made for that care. Of these patients 29 were in the Ulster North Down and Ards Trust. A survey of discharge delays carried out by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board found that there were a number of reasons for such delays. While pressure on community care budgets was a contributory cause in more than half the cases,

"patient or relative disagreement with the assessment outcome",

and

"patient choice of accommodation not being available"

were causes in nearly 20 per cent. of cases. The remaining were due to other reasons such as "housing preparation", "changes in medical condition" and "unavailability of specialist equipment."

Hunt Kennels

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list those hunt kennels which the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland Veterinary Service assessed to be unsatisfactory under the BSE enforcement programme, since 1 January. [3825]

Mr. Murphy: The following list details the hunt kennels which the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland Veterinary Service assessed to be unsatisfactory under the BSE enforcement programme, since 1 January:

Killultagh Hunt Kennels

Newry Harriers

East Antrim Hounds

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many disability living allowance reviews and appeals took place last year; what percentage were successful; what is the average cost of each such procedure; and if she will make a statement on the impact on the work of her Department of the total number of decisions which were overturned. [3828]

Mr. Worthington: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Social Security Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. Alec Wylie, and I have asked him to arrange for a response to be given.

Letter from Alec Wylie to Mr. Robert McCartney, dated 17 June 1997:

I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question about Disability Living Allowance reviews and appeals.

The information you requested on the number of reviews and appeals is set out in the attached tables.

I regret that information on the cost of review and appeal procedures is not maintained separately and to provide this would require a major clerical exercise generating disproportionate costs.

As many customers provide additional evidence throughout the adjudication process, it is inevitable that some of the original decisions will be overturned at the review and appeal stages. Experience also shows that most customers routinely ask for a review or appeal where the higher rates of Disability Living Allowance have not been awarded. In most cases, arrears of benefit arising from overturned decisions are calculated and paid by computer which means that the impact of this work on the Social Security Agency is minimal.

I hope this explains the position for you but I would be happy to provide any further information you require.

Table No. 1: Review decisions implemented during 1996

Year	*Number of review decisions*	*Success rate*
1996 (January to December)	22,253	33.7 per cent. (7,497)

Table No. 2: Tribunal decisions implemented during 1996

Year	*Decisions of appeal tribunal implemented*	*Success rate*
1996 (January to December)	3,358	36.6 per cent. (1,230)

Housing Benefit

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will permit housing benefit to be made available in the form of loans for deposits and first month's advance rental on private sector accommodation. [3831]

Mr. Worthington: No. There is no provision within the housing benefit legislation for the award of loans and there are no plans to change this policy.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is supporting a rent guarantee scheme, which avoids the requirement for an advance or deposit, operated by the Simon Community (NI), a voluntary organisation working with the homeless. The scheme is currently operating as a pilot exercise in the Belfast area and, if successful, is likely to be extended in its scope.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will ensure that the Child Support Agency distinguishes in correspondence to parents between basic payment amounts and arrears amounts; and if she will make a statement. [3827]

Mr. Worthington: Responsibility for this subject has been delegated to the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. Patrick Devlin, and I have asked him to arrange for a response to be given.

Letter from P. Devlin to Mr. Robert McCartney, dated 19 June 1997:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question about distinguishing between basic payment amounts and arrears amounts in correspondence to parents.

When a child maintenance assessment is calculated notifications are issued to both the absent parent and parent with care informing them of the amount and the effective date of the weekly liability. At this stage accounts are set up and further notifications setting out the method, frequency, amount and date of the first regular payment are sent to both parents. They are also advised of the amount of maintenance due for the initial payment period. The absent parent is advised that if he has paid any maintenance during this time for any of the children named the amount of the initial payment may be reduced to take account of monies already paid.

If an absent parent fails to make payment on the due date he is advised that child maintenance payments are in arrears. The notification sets out the due date, amount due, amount paid/adjusted and arrears. He is also asked to pay the arrears in full or if he is unable to do so to contact the Agency immediately to discuss an agreement to pay them. The notification also advises that if an agreement to pay the arrears is reached then payments of regular maintenance must be maintained.

I hope you find this information useful.

Homelessness

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will estimate the cost of providing public sector dwellings for all homeless cases. [3833]

Mr. Murphy: It is not possible to provide an accurate estimate, since those classified as homeless by the Housing Executive are considered for allocations from the existing housing stock or from newly constructed dwellings. They may also be temporarily housed at present in hostels or bed and breakfast accommodation. The national cost of providing new dwellings for the estimated 4,000 currently classified as homeless would be £140 million.

Right to Buy

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will amend the rules of the Housing Executive preventing sales of ground floor dwellings to those becoming tenants after the age of 60 years so as to permit house sales in certain circumstances. [3829]

Mr. Murphy: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and its Chief Executive has advised me that in August 1996 the Housing Executive Board reviewed this aspect of its house sales policy. It decided not to change the scheme because the present policy achieved the necessary balance between the competing needs of tenants who require an adequate supply of such accommodation and potential purchasers who wish to buy their homes.

Rateable Values

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list for each council area the rateable value of *(a)* domestic and *(b)* other hereditaments, indicating the sums she expects to raise for each sector this year; and what were the sums raised in each of the last three years. [4071]

Mr. Murphy: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Rate Collection Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. D. W. Gallagher. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from D. W. Gallagher to Mr. William Ross, dated 18 June 1997:

I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question on rateable values, the total rates to be collected in the 1997/98 rating year and the total rates collected in each of the past three years.

I attach as Annexes '1' to '3' tables showing by District Council the Domestic and Non-Domestic Net Annual Values, the Gross Collectable Rate for these sectors for this rating year and the amount collected by the Rate Collection Agency from 1993/94. You will note that the Annexes have included comments where necessary to clarify the tables.

I hope that this information is of use to you but should you require further explanation please do not hesitate to contact me.

Annex 1

£000s

District council	*Domestic net annual values 1997–98*	*Non-domestic net annual values 1997–98*
Antrim	2,851	26,885
Ards	5,036	23,542
Armagh	3,010	16,115
Ballymena	3,962	29,250
Ballymoney	1,498	7,145
Banbridge	2,544	11,365
Belfast	17,348	265,220
Carrickfergus	2,577	12,483
Castlereagh	4,911	23,855
Coleraine	4,342	23,651
Cookstown	1,657	11,654
Craigavon	4,882	35,543
Derry	5,678	53,696
Down	3,827	18,822
Dungannon	2,375	19,834
Fermanagh	3,065	23,648
Larne	1,993	16,493
Limavady	1,645	9,767
Lisburn	7,313	49,046
Magherafelt	2,022	12,362
Moyle	1,006	3,733
Newry and Mourne	4,571	28,259
Newtownabbey	5,367	36,988
North Down	6,356	31,157
Omagh	2,443	19,025
Strabane	1,806	11,384
Northern Ireland	104,085	820,922

Notes:

1. Net annual value is the yearly rent which a property could be let for assuming it was vacant and that the tenant agreed to pay the rates, keep the property in repair and be responsible for its insurance.
2. Rateable value is the value by reference to which rates are assessed and is either the NAV or a figure derived from it taking into account any relief or exemption.

Source:

Valuation and Lands Agency.

Annex 2

£000s

District council	Gross collectable rates—domestic 1997–98	Gross collectable rates—non domestic 1997–98
Antrim	4,059	10,639
Ards	8,086	8,909
Armagh	4,909	6,346
Ballymena	5,675	10,376
Ballymoney	2,267	2,863
Banbridge	3,877	4,477
Belfast	28,499	107,750
Carrickfergus	4,282	5,353
Castlereagh	7,115	8,359
Coleraine	6,588	9,770
Cookstown	2,504	3,627
Craigavon	7,708	13,215
Derry	9,018	24,000
Down	6,567	7,983
Dungannon	3,486	5,523
Fermanagh	4,584	8,114
Larne	3,300	6,248
Limavady	2,405	3,710
Lisburn	10,382	17,740
Magherafelt	3,097	4,084
Moyle	1,584	1,687
Newry and Mourne	7,624	11,660
Newtownabbey	8,894	15,693
North Down	12,176	12,198
Omagh	3,953	6,973
Strabane	2,552	4,410
Northern Ireland	165,191	321,707
Percentage to collect	97	98.55

Notes:

1. From 1 April 1997 all non-domestic NAV's and subsequently gross collectable rates for that sector require to be identified separately from domestic NAV's and rates.

2. Non-domestic NAV's etc are in line with the Fourth General Revaluation List operative from 1 April 1997 while Domestic NAV's reflect still the values at 1 April 1976.

Source:

Rate Collection Agency.

Annex 3

£000s

District rate	1993–94 collected	1994–95 collected	1995–96 collected	1996–97 collected
Antrim	10,904	12,539	13,326	14,509
Ards	12,678	13,553	14,342	15,531
Armagh	7,836	8,626	9,330	10,205
Ballymena	11,753	12,839	13,899	14,883
Ballymoney	3,789	4,052	4,307	4,692
Banbridge	5,961	6,706	7,450	8,018
Belfast	110,040	116,975	121,942	127,304
Carrickfergus	8,007	8,404	9,072	9,451
Castlereagh	10,967	11,912	13,215	14,934
Coleraine	11,695	12,790	13,852	15,387
Cookstown	4,307	4,553	4,912	5,338
Craigavon	15,891	17,034	18,183	20,051
Derry	22,589	25,439	28,665	31,712
Down	10,033	11,000	12,216	13,443
Dungannon	6,304	6,828	7,531	8,152
Fermanagh	8,680	9,334	10,562	11,123
Larne	7,149	7,010	7,180	7,696
Limavady	4,466	4,888	5,405	5,847
Lisburn	19,634	21,645	22,805	25,053
Magherafelt	4,827	5,408	5,883	6,425
Moyle	2,520	2,700	2,928	3,085
Newry and Mourne	12,700	14,052	15,312	17,569
Newtownabbey	18,071	19,505	21,128	22,233

Annex 3

£000s

District rate	1993–94 collected	1994–95 collected	1995–96 collected	1996–97 collected
North Down	15,959	18,019	19,867	21,585
Omagh	7,768	8,312	9,160	10,166
Strabane	5,088	5,425	5,856	6,098
Northern Ireland	359,414	389,453	417,518	450,490
Percentage collected	98.23	97.92	98.01	98.05

Notes:

1. Prior to 1 April 1997 Agency collected of rates did not differentiate between domestic and non-domestic Sectors.

2. Rates collected includes discharges such as vacant property etc.

Source:

Rate Collection Agency.

Motor Sports Events

Mr. Trimble: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what consultation motor clubs are required to undertake with residents in respect of the closing of public roads for the purpose of motor sports events. [4025]

Mr. Murphy: None. However the promoter of a motor race for which the Department of the Environment is making a road closing order is required by the Road Races (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 (SI 1986/1887 [NI 17]) to give adequate notice of the event. The order also requires the Department to ensure that public notice of the provisions of any road closing order are brought to the attention of the public.

Mr. Trimble: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many times public roads in Northern Ireland have been closed in each of the last five years for the purpose of staging motor sports events. [4026]

Mr. Murphy: The number of road closing orders made by the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland was:

Year	Road races	Hill-climbs	Kart races	Total
1992	10	9	4	23
1993	10	8	4	22
1994	10	8	4	22
1995	10	8	3	21
1996	10	7	3	20

Mr. Trimble: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what consultation is required between the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Ulster Automobile Club with regard to the closing of roads in Northern Ireland for the circuit of Ireland rally. [4024]

Mr. Murphy: The Road Races (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 (SI 1986–87 [NI 17]) requires the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland to consult the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary before making any road closing order in respect of a motor racing event. The Department is not required to consult the Ulster Automobile Club which is the promoter of the Circuit or Ireland Rally.

Business Rates

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is her estimate of the rates paid as a percentage of the turnover of retail business. [4069]

Mr. Murphy: The information is not available because there is no estimate for Northern Ireland retail turnover separate from that of the United Kingdom.

Electricity Prices

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland by how much the price of a unit of electric power has increased in cash and percentage terms in each of the last five years; and what factors have contributed to this increase, separately identifying those relating to the non-fossil fuels obligation. [4072]

Mr. Ingram: The prices charged under Northern Ireland's tariff in each of the last five years, and the year by year increases are given in the following table:

Northern Ireland electricity tariff charges

Year	p/kWh[1]	Percentage increase/decrease	Percentage of which due to NFFO
1992–93	6.827	—	—
1993–94	7.238	+6.02	—
1994–95	7.050	–2.60	+0.13
1995–96	7.370	+4.54	+0.61
1996–97	7.517	+1.99	+0.74

[1] Average unit cost based on sales.

There were a number of factors which contributed to these increases, including the cost of coal and fuel oil on the international markets, the effects of general inflationary pressures and, to a less significant degree, the increase in the level of renewable energy production.

Mr. Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much electrical power has been generated by *(a)* wind, *(b)* water and *(c)* other non-fossil fuel sources in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years for which figures are available; what was the price (i) per unit and (ii) in total paid by Northern Ireland Electricity for such energy from each source in each of these years; and how much of the electrical power generated by each source in each year was transmitted to customers via the electricity grid. [4070]

Mr. Ingram: The amount of electrical power which has been generated by non-fossil fuel sources in Northern Ireland during the last five years and the price paid per unit by Northern Ireland Electricity is given in the following table.

Year	Wind GWh	Wind p/Kwh[1]	Hydro GWh	Hydro p/kWh[1]	Other non-fossil fuel sources GWh	Other non-fossil fuel sources p/kWh[1]	Total GWh
1992–93	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1993–94	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1994–95	13.496	6.507	0.139	7.098	—	—	13.635
1995–96	65.252	6.546	0.662	7.036	—	—	65.914
1996–97	80.815	6.553	2.322	6.851	—	—	83.137

[1] Average unit price.

The total paid by Northern Ireland Electricity for non-fossil fuel energy from each source in each of the last five years is given in the following table:

Year	Wind £	Hydro £	Other non-fossil fuel sources	Total £
1992–93	—	—	—	—
1993–94	—	—	—	—
1994–95	878,214	9,859	—	880,073
1995–96	4,271,420	46,592	—	4,318,012
1996–97	5,295,819	159,049	—	5,454,868

All the electrical energy generated by the renewable energy sources shown above was transmitted to customers via the electricity grid.

Mr. Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will publish the formula used to determine the price paid for electrical power under the non-fossil fuel obligation contracts awarded under each tranche of contracts indicating the figures used in the calculations. [4067]

Mr. Ingram: Non-fossil fuel obligaton contracts are awarded to developers after an open competition on the basis of lowest priced bids within each renewable technology band. Bid prices are expected to reduce in each succeeding NFFO competition towards the prices prices paid to fossil fuel generators.

Retail Petrol Industry

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to keep under review the retail petrol industry in Northern Ireland; and if she will make a statement. [3840]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The Director General of Fair Trading recently announced a review of the wholesale and retail petrol market in the United Kingdom. The review will cover Northe.n Ireland.

SOCIAL SECURITY

State Retirement Pensions (Overseas Residents)

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will implement the recommendation of the Social Security Committee in its third report, "Uprating of State Retirement Pensions Payable to People Resident Abroad" (HC 143, 1996–97) relating to the granting of a

free vote to hon. Members on the payment of upratings to pensioners living in countries where uprating are not paid at present; and if she will make a statement. [604]

Mr. Denham: We recognise the strong feelings regarding this long-standing policy among UK pensioners who live in those countries where pensions are not uprated.

However, there are competing demands and constraints on social security spending. In these circumstances, the Government believes that it would be wrong to raise expectations that an uprating of these pensions would be likely to attract priority.

Poverty

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment her Department has made of the report prepared by the European Commission's Eurostat secretariat on the comparative levels of poverty in EU member states. [863]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The Government has considered the report. We are determined to tackle unjustifiable social and economic inequality through a range of initiatives.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will estimate the number and proportion of United Kingdom households living under the Council of Europe poverty threshold; and if she will publish this information monthly. [4404]

Mr. Bradley: The Council of Europe decency threshold relates to individual earnings. It is therefore not meaningful to compare this with total disposable income of households. Information on the numbers and proportions of individuals, whose household income is below various levels, is published annually in the DSS statistical series "Households Below Average Income," a copy of which is in the Library. The estimates are drawn from household surveys, whose sample sizes would not allow any valid estimates to be made on a monthly basis.

Incomes

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many households to date are currently in receipt of below average income *(a)* nationally and *(b)* by regions. [866]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Reforming the welfare state will be one of our key priorities. We will modernise the welfare system to reduce poverty and social division.

The DSS series "Households Below Average Income" reports the numbers of individuals in households below average income rather than the numbers of households.

The information in the table shows the numbers of individuals living in households with below national average income. Figures are provided both on income before housing costs are deducted (BHC) and on income after housing costs are deducted (AHC), in line with DSS conventions on income statistics.

The latest estimates for the United Kingdom are for 1993–94 and 1994–95 financial years combined—shown in the table as "1993–94"—and are based on data from the Family Expenditure Survey (FES). The FES sample is not sufficiently large to allow regional analysis but regional estimates are available from the Family Resources Survey (FRS) for 1994–95. The FRS has a very much larger sample but does not include Northern Ireland.

No allowance has been made for any regional variations in the cost of living.

Numbers of individuals living in households with below average income (millions)

	Numbers—BHC	*Numbers—AHC*
1993–94		
United Kingdom	36.0	35.5
Great Britain (FES)	35.0	34.5
1994–95		
Great Britain (FRS)	34.8	34.4
England	29.8	29.5
Wales	1.9	1.8
Scotland	3.1	3.0
Government Office region		
North-east	1.9	1.9
North-west	3.9	3.7
Merseyside	0.7	0.7
Yorkshire and the Humber	3.5	3.4
East Midlands	2.7	2.6
West Midlands	3.4	3.4
Eastern	3.0	3.1
London	3.8	3.9
South-east	3.8	3.9
South-west	3.0	3.0

Note:

Numbers may not add to national totals because of rounding.

Source:

DSS 'Households Below Average Income' (HBAI) datasets, from Family Expenditure Survey and Family Resources Survey.

Housing Benefit (Winchester)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people are currently claiming housing benefit in Winchester *(a)* under the age of 25 years and *(b)* in total; and if she will make a statement. [1288]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is set out in the table:

Housing benefit recipients

	May 1995	*November 1996*
All ages: Winchester City Council area[1]	5,300	5,100
All ages: Rest of South-east region (excludes Greater London but includes Winchester)[1]	650,000	647,400
Aged under 25 years: Rest of South-east region (excludes Greater London but includes Winchester)[2]	67,000	Not available

Source:

Housing Benefit Management Information System.

[1] 100 per cent. quarterly caseload counts—these do not provide age breakdown of Housing Benefit recipients.

[2] The annual 1 per cent. caseload sample—last available date from May 1995 (May 1996 date not yet available).

Notes:

1. Reliable estimates of the number of recipients aged under 25 are not available below regional level.
2. Recipients may be a single person or a couple.

Widowers (Child Care)

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to provide widowers looking after children with the same benefits as widows. [2382]

Mr. Denham: Modernising the Social Security system is a key priority of the Government. In our examination of the current Social Security structure, we will take account of the needs and responsibilities of the bereaved in pursuit of our aim of reducing poverty and welfare dependency, promoting work incentives and providing better, simpler more efficient services to clients.

Incapacity Benefit

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will restore an element of local discretion on decisions relating to the award of incapacity benefits. [2173]

Mr. Denham: Modernising the Social Security system is a key priority of the Government. Our objective is to reduce poverty and welfare dependency and to promote work incentives. We will develop a system that supports work, savings and honesty. We will streamline services to provide better, simpler, more efficient services to clients.

As part of this aim we will be seeking to ensure that decisions relating to the award of incapacity benefits provide a fair assessment of a person's incapacity for work for benefit purposes.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claimants appealed against refusal by the Benefits Agency to allow incapacity benefit in 1996–97; what was that number as a percentage of the total number of claims refused; and what percentage of appeals were successful. [3759]

Mr. Denham: One of the Government's first priorities for social security is to modernise both the appeals system and the decision making process. We intend to bring forward measures early to streamline and simplify the system to make it easier to understand and more cost effective.

The specific information requested on incapacity benefit appeals is in the table:

Period	*Number of incapacity benefit appeals against disallowance*	*Appeals as a proportion of claims disallowed*	*Percentage of appeals heard and decided in the claimant's favour*
April 1996 to March 1997	100,703	50 per cent.	44

Source:
Benefits Agency and Independent Tribunal Service.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what reforms she plans to the Child Support Agency; and if she will make a statement. [2474]

Mr. Keith Bradley: We will be looking closely at all areas of the Child Support Agency's operations over the coming months to ensure it provides an efficient and effective service to assess and collect maintenance that is due.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is her estimate of revenue expenditure and savings, broken down by (i) income tax, (ii) national insurance and (iii) means tested benefits, arising from the introduction of a national minimum wage at *(a)* £3.50 per hour and *(b)* £4.20 per hour, accompanied by a reduction in housing benefit and family credit tapers to 50 per cent. and replacing the current 20 tax band with 10p. [2969]

Mr. Field: We will ask the independent Low Pay Commission, before it reaches a recommendation on the level at which the national minimum wage might be set, to take into account all the economic circumstances, including its likely impact. We will not speculate about the possible effects of hypothetical levels before the Commission has had a chance to consider the issues.

Benefits (Immigrants)

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of spouses of British citizens admitted under the Immigration Rules obtained social security benefits in each of the three most recent years for which figures are available; and what was the cost of such benefits in each year. [2867]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Spouses of British citizens admitted to the United Kingdom under the Immigration Rules are required to demonstrate they can be supported and accommodated without claiming public funds.

Carers (Earnings Limited)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to make the earnings limit for carers on income support equivalent to the earnings limit for invalid care allowance; and if she will make a statement. [2868]

Mr. Denham: There is no fixed limit to the amount a carer can earn and continue to receive income support. Carers are exempt from the normal income support remunerative work rule. This means that they can continue to receive income support to top-up their earnings even if they work more than 16 hours each week. The first £15 of a carer's earnings is disregarded in the income support calculation. Most other groups can earn only £5 before their benefit is affected.

The invalid care allowance (ICA) earnings limit is fixed at £50 per week, after the deduction of certain expenses. It is intended to help carers keep contact with employment. However, unlike income support, ICA is not an income-related benefit. People with earnings below the earnings limit can get ICA in full but people whose earnings are above the limit cannot get ICA at all.

We have no plans to change these limits at present but are keeping the position of carers under review.

Lone Parents

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents there are in the constituency of Bolton, West; and of these how many are not in work or training. [3056]

Mr. Keith Bradley: There are no reliable estimates of the number of lone parents by constituency. As a broad indication of the number of lone parents not in work it is estimated that, in November 1995, there were 5,000 lone parents claiming income support in the metropolitan district of Bolton, which encompasses a larger area than Bolton, West.

Our welfare-to-work programme will help get young unemployed people, long-term unemployed people and lone mothers off benefit and into work.

Notes:

1. Caseload figures have been rounded to the nearest thousand.

2. Income Support figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 1995 (5 per cent. sample).

Pensions

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to review the additional 25 pence a week paid to pensioners over 80 years of age. [3147]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer), on 10 June, *Official Report*, column *431*.

Benefits (Take-up)

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what targets she has set the Benefits Agency to increase the level of take-up of benefits to which claimants are entitled for each type of benefit administered. [3217]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Our priority is to get help to around 1 million pensioners not taking up their income support entitlement. We are determined to address this issue, and we are currently commissioning research to establish why they do not claim the benefit which is their due.

Means-tested Benefits

Professor Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many individuals lived in benefit units receiving at least one means-tested benefit *(a)* in 1978–79 and *(b)* in the latest year for which figures are available; and if she will break down this total according to the combinations of benefits received. [4306]

Mr. Keith Bradley: We are committed to looking closely at all aspects of the welfare state to reduce the levels of poverty and welfare dependency.

Information for 1993–94 and for 1979 has been published in table B4 of Households Below Average Income (HBAI): 1979 to 1993–94, a copy of which is in the Library. No information is available for 1978. Information for 1979 is restricted to that published in HBAI.

An indication of the numbers of beneficiaries of the main combinations of benefits at May 1995 is given in the table.

Beneficiaries of means-tested benefits for May 1995 by combinations of benefits received

Combination of benefit	*Total beneficiaries*
Family credit or disability working allowance only	1,230,000
Income support only	2,370,000
Family credit or disability working allowance and income support	20,000
Housing benefit and/or council tax benefit only	3,190,000
Housing benefit and/or council tax benefit, and family credit or disability working allowance	780,000
Housing benefit and/or council tax benefit, and income support	7,230,000
Housing benefit and/or council tax benefit and family credit or disability working allowance and income support	80,000
All beneficiaries of means tested benefits	14,900,000

Notes:

1. Mean tested benefits are defined as income support, housing benefit, council tax benefit, family credit and disability working allowance.

2. Beneficiaries are defined as the recipient, their partner and their dependants.

3. Figures are rounded to the nearest ten thousand.

4. Income support figures include people in residential care/nursing homes.

Sources:

1. Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry May 1995.

2. Family credit 5 per cent. sample of awards.

3. Disability working allowance 100 per cent. count of claims.

4. Housing benefit management information system, annual 1 per cent. sample enquiries, with and without income support taken at the end of May 1995.

Benefits Statistics

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if she will list the estimated unclaimed benefit in each of the 13 area directorates of the Benefits Agency for each of the last five years for which figures are available *(a)* as amounts of benefit unclaimed and *(b)* as a percentage of total payments made for each type of benefit administered; [3215]

(2) if she will make it a requirement for the Benefits Agency to collect and publish annual statistics estimating the level of unclaimed benefit each year for each type of benefit administered by the Agency. [3216]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The regional figures requested are not collected. The latest estimates of national take-up of Income Related Benefits were published in "Income Related Benefits: Estimates of Take-up 1994–95", a copy of which is in the Library. These are the benefits of last resort and it is right that we pay particular attention to their take-up.

We will examine means of delivering more automatic help to the poorest pensioners—one million of whom do not even receive the income support which is their present entitlement. We are commissioning research to establish why they do not claim the benefit which is their due.

Adapt Programme

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to review the Adapt programme. [4915]

Mr. Field: The Department is engaged in a range of private sector initiatives, one of which is Adapt. We will review all proposals in the light of our objectives for modernising the delivery of the welfare system; the implications for customer service, staff and the taxpayer; our commitment to work within the announced spending totals for the first two years of Government; our aim of getting best value for public money; the scope to apply the private sector's expertise, discipline and economies of scale in procuring pubic services and securing investment; and the flexibility for government to make changes at a later date. Announcements will be made in due course.

Green Paper

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will publish the analysis of responses to the Green Paper, "Improving Decision-Making and Appeals in Social Security." [5181]

Mr. Keith Bradley: We have today published the analysis of responses to the Green Paper carried out by the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York and arranged for copies to be placed in the Library.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 24 June 1997

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Civil Service (Sickness Absence)

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what is the overall level of sickness absence in the Civil Service. [5469]

Dr. David Clark: The average number of working days sickness absence per staff-year in 1995 was 10.7.

I have placed in the house Libraries copies of the report prepared for my department by OHSA Limited on Sickness Absence in the Civil Service during 1995, which contains a comprehensive analysis of the figures about the Civil Service. That report also contains corrections to some of the figures about sickness absence in the Civil Service for previous years.

My Department regularly encourages Departments and agencies to review their approaches to sickness absence management.

Cash Limits

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what proposals there are to change the 1997–98 cash limit or running cost limit for the Office of Public Service. [5470]

Dr. David Clark: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the cash limit for the Office of Public Service (Class XVII, Vote 1) will be increased by £74,000 from £140,987,000 to £141,061,000 and the gross running cost limit will be decreased by £411,000 from £80,886,000 to £80,475,000.

The changes reflect the transfer of responsibility for the Hardcopy Publications function from the Lord Chancellor's Department (Class VIII, Vote 1); the transfer of Competitiveness Unit to the Department of Trade and Industry (Class IV, Vote 1); the creation of the Government Car and Despatch Agency (GCDA); provision for the introduction of trade between The Buying Agency (TBA) and the Republic of Ireland Civil Service; provision for TBA loan repayments; re-classification of CCTA marketing and research expenditure; and provision for the residual costs of the privatisation of executive agencies in 1996–97. The increase in the cash limit will be offset by a transfer in and will not, therefore, add to the total of planned expenditure. The GCDA will have a net running cost limit of zero.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Cash Limits

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what changes he proposes to make to his Department's cash limits for 1997–98. [5550]

Mr. Chris Smith: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the cash limit for Class X, Vote 1 will be increased by £1,523,000 from £866,330,000 to £867,853,000. This is to increase provision for transfers from the Department for Education and Employment (Class IX, Vote 1) for awards to dance and drama students, and from the Ordnance Survey (Class VI, Vote 8) to the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England for rent on a property; and a machinery of government change transferring voluntary services to the Home Office. The increases will be offset by transfers and savings, and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

National Lottery

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how much *(a)* was expected and *(b)* has been realised to date (i) for good causes and (ii) in tax from the national lottery. [3778]

Mr. Chris Smith: Camelot's original forecasts for turnover from the start of the licence to the end of March 1997 suggested that £2,228.8 million would be raised for good causes and that £955.2 million would be paid in lottery duty. In fact £3,212.6 million was raised for the good causes and £1,324.3 million was paid in lottery duty during that period.

Camelot Directors

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage when the Government were first informed of arrangements for bonuses for Camelot directors. [3777]

Mr. Chris Smith: The bonus arrangements for the directors of Camelot were set out in their 1995 and 1996 annual reports. The scale of the current bonuses was drawn to my attention after reports appeared in a magazine on 28 May.

Accommodation Grading Schemes

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what progress he has made to rationalise accommodation grading schemes throughout the United Kingdom. [3092]

Mr. Tom Clarke *[holding answer 23 June 1997]:* So far as England is concerned, the AA, RAC and ETB announced in February plans for a new harmonised scheme which for the first time would give a single rating for hotels according to both the quality of their service and the facilities they offer. They will be consulting the industry on the details of this and on a scheme covering non-hotel serviced accommodation, such as guest houses, B&Bs, farmhouses and inns.

Responsibility for accommodation rating schemes in Scotland and Wales rests with my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for those countries.

DEFENCE

Royal Navy Fleet Maintenance and Repair Organisation

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the results of the review of the Royal Navy's Fleet Maintenance and Repair Organisation, Portsmouth and the Tidworth/Bulford and Salisbury Garrisons and on his Department's approach to efficiency in the Army Individual Training Organisation. [5475]

Dr. Reid: Against the yardstick of our approach to securing best value for money for the taxpayer explained in my hon. Friend's answer to my hon. Friend the member for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall) on 19 June, *Official Report*, column *264–65*, we have now considered the results of two recently completed market tests, of the Royal Navy's Fleet Maintenance and Repair Organisation (FMRO) and of support services at the Tidworth/Bulford and Salisbury Garrisons.

At the FMRO, I am pleased to announce that Fleet Support Limited (FSL) a joint venture company formed by Vosper Thorneycroft and VSEL (GEC Marine), is the preferred bidder for the operation of the facility and, subject to a satisfactory conclusion of detailed discussions on terms and conditions, we will shortly place a five year contract for the management of the FMRO, with a vesting day this autumn. We are confident that the FMRO under commercial management will continue to provide a first class service to the Fleet. Additionally, FSL has guaranteed to attract a minimum level of commercial work into the FMRO and will maintain the apprentice training scheme. Although there will initially be some redundancies, FSL's bid provides the most promising set of arrangements for the future of the FMRO and its workforce, and for the people of Portsmouth. It offers excellent value for money, with savings of over 30 per cent.

At the Tidworth/Bulford and Salisbury Garrisons, I am pleased also to announce that the market test of support services has been won by the in-house team supported by a commercial partner, in competition with four commercial consortia. We expect shortly to put in place a service level agreement with the in-house team, providing savings of over 25 per cent. through rationalisation and reorganisation of the wide range of support services covered by the market test. Job losses will occur but redundancies will be kept to a minimum.

In addition, we have reviewed previous plans to conduct market tests at establishments throughout the Army Individual Training Organisation (AITO), a Defence Agency. A new approach has been developed based on the concept of wider partnering with the private sector. We expect to introduce this programme progressively in the majority of AITO establishments. Previously planned market tests at some establishments have been abandoned in favour of programmes to achieve efficiencies in-house, with the prospect that these establishments will join the partnering programme at a later stage.

The establishments include the Army Training Regiments at Bassingbourn, Glencorse, Lichfield, Purbright and Winchester; the Infantry Training Centre at Catterick; the Royal School of Artillery Larkhill; and the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. We will complete the contractorisation project at the Royal Armoured Corps Centre, Bovington, and issue invitations to tender for a market test at the School of Electrical and Mechanical Engineering at Bordon, and for the renewal with wider scope of the support contract at the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers at Arborfield.

These specific announcements underline our determination to adopt, in each area of our business, the approach best calculated to maximise the value we obtain from defence resources.

Science and Technology Division

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if the Defence Review will include a reappraisal of the proposal to transfer the Science and Technology Division from Colchester to Bicester; [4476]

(2) what the current estimated capital cost is of the proposed transfer of the Science and Technology Division from Colchester to Bicester; and if he will make a statement; [4475]

(3) if he will postpone preparations for the transfer of the Science and Technology Division from Colchester to Bicester until the conclusion of the Defence Review. [4477]

Dr. Reid: Any outcome of the Defence Review will retain a requirement for the Armed Forces to be clothed. As a consequence, we assess that there will be an on-going need for the continuing activity of the Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency (DCTA) and the need to retain a research and development capability.

A number of studies have examined the most cost effective way for this capability to be provided. These include the Prior Options Study that preceded the formation of the Agency, specific scrutiny in the Defence Cost Studies and most recently by consideration of private finance involvement in the Agency. Further studies have specifically addressed the collocation of the Agency, including the transfer of the Science and Technology Division from Colchester. These have identified considerable savings and business benefit from collocation. The Strategic Defence Review will not look specifically at the Science and Technology Division of the DCTA, and there are no plans to postpone its transfer from Colchester to Caversfield.

The transfer of the Science and Technology Division from Colchester to Bicester is part of a single project for the collocation of laboratories and workshops of the Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency on a single site. Further laboratories and workshops will transfer from the Quality and Product Support Division currently at Didcot. A major benefit from the collocation plan is to merge the currently duplicated facilities at each site and the project is costed on the basis of providing dual use facilities. Because of this joint development I regret it is not possible to identify separately the capital costs of the transfer for the Colchester element alone.

The cost of the total project has been revalidated recently by a firm of consultants employed by the Defence Estates Organisation. Their report dated 13 June 1997 indicated a cost of £5.9 million for the total project. The figure remains very close to the last costing of

£5.1 million when savings were forecast at £17.7 million over the Investment Appraisal period of 20 years, in addition to the £6 million per year savings predicated on the new businesses practices that the DCTA can introduce by collocating.

Polaris

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what were the capital and running costs of the Polaris fleet in each year from 1967; [4837]

(2) what was the annual running and maintenance cost in each year when the four boat Polaris fleet was fully operational. [4838]

Dr. Reid: Full details of capital and running costs for the Polaris fleet over the 30-year period in question are not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. Expenditure on Polaris running costs for the years 1980–81 to 1996–97 at historic prices are as follows:

Financial year	*Spend at historic prices £ million*
1980–81	162
1981–82	238
1982–83	256
1983–84	233
1984–85	219
1985–86	241
1986–87	281
1987–88	296
1988–89	271
1989–90	236
1990–91	210
1991–92	164
1992–93	151
1993–94	103
1994–95	65
1995–96	67
1996–97	(estimated) 53

Chemical Weapons

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what remediation and post-operational monitoring has taken place at the British overseas chemical weapons test sites at *(a)* Rawalpindi, Wellesley barracks, Cannanore Porkal and Kumbla, India, *(b)* Sorbo Plain Near Sapele, Nigeria and *(c)* Pualo Tenggol, Dungun, Malaysia. [4301]

Dr. Reid: We are unable to find any records that document remediation work of post-operational monitoring at the sites listed other than for Obanokoro where it is stated that all efforts were made to retrieve any unexploded munitions. The information we do have suggests that usage of these sites was relatively small scale and would not have been expected to leave any traces.

Trident

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his current estimate of the total cost of the four boat Trident fleet. [4839]

Dr. Reid: The latest estimate of the total acquisition cost of the Trident programme is £12.57 billion at 1996–97 economic conditions. This is over £3.6 billion less in real terms than the original 1982 estimate. Operating costs are estimated to be some £200 million per annum over a 30-year in-service life.

Dockyard Workers, Chatham

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how his Department intends to reconstruct records of the ex-Chatham dockyard workers who may have been exposed to radiation. [4787]

Mr. Spellar: As required by legislation, dose records are kept for former Chatham dockyard radiation workers who were designated as classified persons because their work led to higher annual radiation exposures. Many, but not all, records relating to the radiation exposure of non-classified workers have also been retained.

Where no dose record exists, my Department is examining methods of dose reconstruction based on employment history, radiation exposure information from surveys, and the exposure of comparable workers for whom there are dose records.

Falklands Garrison

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has the cost of maintaining the Falklands garrison in each of the last three years. [4862]

Dr. Reid: The outturn cost to the Ministry of Defence of the Falkland Islands Garrison, in each of the past three years, is as follows:

1994–95: £65.5 million

1995–96: £70 million

1996–97: £81 million.

Nuclear Submarines, Chatham

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the accident records of nuclear submarines whilst they were undergoing maintenance at Chatham dockyard. [4786]

Dr. Reid: There have been no nuclear reactor accidents involving HM submarines. However, my Department does have records of a number of less serious incidents at Chatham dockyard involving the exposure of personnel to radiation and/or unauthorised discharges to the environment which warranted investigation at the time.

The reports of these incidents contain reference to individuals who may have been involved and to others who may have contributed information, sometimes in confidence, to the investigation. This precludes the release of the reports as they stand. I am seeking information from my officials as to the practicability of providing summaries of those incidents, and will write to the hon. Member in due course.

Family Quarters

Mr. Gunnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of the empty service quarters for families which his Department *(a)* identified for disposal and *(b)* classed as empty and under review in March have been sold to private buyers. [4918]

Mr. Spellar: A total of 159 of the 1,755 family quarters identified for disposal in March, have been sold. The 3,740 empty properties are still under review.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Speeding Offences (Fines)

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his policy with regard to on-the-spot fines for speeding offences administered by police officers; and if he will make a statement. [4622]

Mr. Michael: There is no system of on-the-spot fines for the enforcement of road traffic offences but drivers who are stopped by the police for alleged speeding may be issued with fixed penalty notices requiring payment of a set sum of £40 to a court within 28 days and have their licence endorsed with three penalty points. Police officers have no authority to demand or accept payment of a fixed penalty on the spot.

Payment of the fixed penalty discharges the offender's liability to conviction by a court. It is open to a driver to decline to accept a fixed penalty and instead request a court hearing in respect of the alleged offence.

Policy on the circumstances in which fixed penalty notices are used for enforcing road traffic law is an operational matter for individual chief officers of police. Guidance has been issued to forces by the Association of Chief Police Officers, with the aim of promoting a uniformity of approach to enforcement.

Tote

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement about the future of the Tote; [4771]

(2) pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) of 12 June, *Official Report*, column *512*, if he will make a statement on the steps he is taking to secure a successor to the chairman of the Tote; which parties he has consulted; and when he expects to make an announcement. [4772]

Mr. Straw: I hope to appoint the new chairman of the Tote shortly.

The competition for the post is being conducted in accordance with the Nolan procedures for public appointments, including advertising the post and consideration by a Home Office advisory panel. I am considering a short list of candidates. It would be premature to make any further comment at this stage.

There are no plans at present to change the statutory arrangements governing the Tote. The new chairman will be tasked with a wide-ranging review of the Tote's operations.

Puppy Farms

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received concerning animal welfare standards in puppy farms. [4768]

Mr. George Howarth: Representations have been received from hon. Members, members of the public and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

HM Prison, Weare

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the recent fire on HM prison, Weare. [4767]

Ms Joyce Quin: There was no fire on the Weare. On the morning of Thursday 12 June, staff on board the Weare saw smoke and immediately activated the fire alarms. Staff and contractors were quickly evacuated and the fire brigade called, no prisoners were on board the vessel. The fire brigade found no evidence of any fire and have classed this as a false alarm. Staff believe the smoke came from welding work flushed out when the air conditioning system was tested.

The smoke alarms were also activated in the evening of Tuesday 17 June. The ship was again quickly evacuated and the fire brigade called. The fire brigade found no fire and confirmed that the alarm had been activated because of smoke from welding work.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the animal welfare implications of selling animals to children under the age of 16 years; and if he will make a statement. [4769]

Mr. George Howarth: The Pet Animals Act 1951, as amended, prohibits the sale of animals as pets to persons under the age of 12 years. No assessment has been made as to whether the current age limit has implications for animal welfare.

Cash Limits

Ms Keeble: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has for changes to the 1997–98 cash limits within his responsibilities. [5474]

Mr. Straw: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for Class VII, Vote 1 (Home Office administration, police, probation, immigration and other services, England and Wales) will be increased by £127,000 from £4,729,044,000 to £4,729,171,000. This increase is the net effect of a transfer of running costs from the Cabinet Office, and from non-voted fire credit approvals. This transfer from non-voted provision reduces the non-voted cash limit (HO/LACAP) by £60,000 from £89,606,000 to £89,546,000. The Supplementary Estimate will also cover the transfer of responsibility for voluntary services from the Department of National Heritage.

In consequence of the above changes, the Home Office gross running cost limit will be increased by £67,000 from £1,887,613,000 to £1,887,680,000.

The increases will be offset by transfers and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Police Grant

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has to re-examine the apportionment of police grant to shire and metropolitan authorities. [4998]

Mr. Michael: We will be looking carefully at the funding formula by which resources are allocated between police authorities, to consider what modifications might be made both for the short and the longer term.

Internet

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what use he plans to make of the Internet to make government more open. [5095]

Mr. Straw: My Department will continue to pursue its programme of publishing material on the Internet whenever suitable opportunities arise.

The Home Office site *www.homeoffice.gov.uk* includes two pages of information about my Department's open government policies. The first, *www.homeoffice.gov.uk/opengov1.htm*, gives details of the system for making suggestions or complaints. The second, *www.homeoffice.gov.uk/opengov2.htm*, sets out the procedures for requesting information.

A wide range of information is available on the site, which is updated continually, and at present contains 288 pages. It has already been used to make consultation papers available more widely. It was also the first Government site to include details of its new ministerial team, and has links to other Government and relevant public sector pages.

UK Passport Agency

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how the UK Passport Agency performed against its targets in 1996–97; and what performance targets he has set for the Agency in 1997–98. [5553]

Mr. Straw: I am pleased to say that the UK Passport Agency achieved all its targets in 1996–97. The targets for processing properly completed straightforward applications were met with demand for passport services at its highest recorded level. The average turnround time for the whole year was 6.3 working days. The Passport Agency's financial target was to reduce its unit cost by three per cent. in real terms. The latest indications are that the agency has achieved an 8.5 per cent. real terms reduction in its unit cost. Customer satisfaction levels remain very high.

During 1997–98, I expect the Passport Agency to continue to improve its standard of service to the public and manage a predicted reduction in demand as efficiently as possible.

I have set the agency the following key targets:-

1. to process properly completed straightforward applications within a maximum of 10 working days.

2. to secure real terms efficiency savings of 11.1 per cent. in the 3 year period 1995–96 to 1997–98.

The Chief Executive will remain directly accountable to me for the performance of the Passport Agency. An advisory board, including two private sector members with experience of delivering services to the public, will continue to provide me with an independent assessment of the agency's performance.

Drugs

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department by what means he ensures that each police authority follows a consistent policy on cautioning persons for possession of cannabis; and if he will make a statement on the practice of multiple cautioning. [4793]

Mr. Michael: It is for the police to decide whether to caution a person found in possession of a controlled drug, in light of the circumstances of the individual case and in accordance with the guidance on the cautioning of offenders in Home Office Circular 18/1994. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary examines forces' overall cautioning policy and determines whether the policy is being observed in practice.

In 1995, the Association of Chief Police Officers issued further guidance on cautioning which encourages the use of gravity factors to ensure consistent identification of aggravating and mitigating circumstances in the decision-making process.

The Government intend to tackle the lack of consistency in cautioning and to reduce repeat cautions in respect of all offences. This is why we have pledged to replace repeat cautions with a single final warning for young offenders.

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the total amount *(a)* spent and *(b)* allocated by his Department on tackling problems relating to drugs in respect of (i) improving international co-operation to reduce supplies from abroad, (ii) increasing the effectiveness of police and Customs enforcement, (iii) maintaining effective deterrents and tight domestic controls, (iv) developing prevention publicity, education and community action and (v) improving treatment and rehabilitation, for (1) 1994, (2) 1995, (3) 1996 and (4) 1997. [4784]

Mr. George Howarth: Information on total Government and individual Departments' expenditure on tackling drug misuse is not recorded on an annual basis. The most recently available estimates were published in the White Paper, "Tackling Drugs Together" in May 1996. They show that at least £526 million of expenditure in 1993–94 could be directly attributable to drug programmes and activities across the United Kingdom.

The Government will be appointing a "drug czar" to co-ordinate action against drugs, working to the President of the Council as Chair of the Cabinet's co-ordinating committee on drug misuse. One of his or her first tasks will be to review urgently the existing drugs strategy, and put forward proposals for tackling the problem with renewed vigour. This review will include current Government expenditure.

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list by type of drug the number of persons for each police authority in England and Wales *(a)* cautioned, *(b)* proceeded against in a magistrate's court and *(c)* tried at the Crown Court for possession of a proscribed drug in (i) 1994, (ii) 1995 and (iii) the last 12 month period for which figures are available. [4794]

Mr. Michael: Details of the numbers of persons cautioned, proceeded against in a magistrates' court or tried at the Crown court for possession of a controlled drug in 1994 and 1995, by type of drug and police force area, are given in the tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library. Data for 1996 will not be available until the late autumn.

Number of persons cautioned for possession of drugs by police force area and type of drug, 1994[1]

Police force area	*Type of drug*									
	All drugs	*Cocaine*	*Crack*	*Heroin*	*LS*	*MDMA*	*Methadone*[2]	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other drugs*
Avon and Somerset	673	—	—	2	1	3	—	34	595	38
Bedfordshire	101	—	—	1	—	1	—	—	78	22
Cambridgeshire	503	—	—	—	1	—	—	2	501	—
Cheshire	937	2	—	19	61	9	—	35	784	27
Cleveland	390	—	—	—	7	1	—	63	318	4
Cumbria	353	—	—	1	3	3	—	5	341	4
Derbyshire	412	—	—	—	4	3	—	9	264	133
Devon and Cornwall	1,328	4	—	8	7	14	—	107	1,210	45
Dorset	147	1	—	—	—	—	—	2	144	—
Durham	161	—	—	—	—	—	—	7	154	—
Essex	963	—	—	3	6	5	—	60	884	17
Gloucestershire	471	—	—	1	2	3	—	9	464	—
Greater Manchester	2,540	12	—	135	9	1	—	108	2,230	45
Hampshire	1,476	1	—	2	2	4	—	19	1,458	3
Hertfordshire	536	2	—	2	4	9	—	34	483	2
Humberside	427	—	—	1	—	1	—	1	413	12
Kent	782	3	—	—	6	2	—	33	738	9
Lancashire	1,268	—	1	14	5	1	—	53	1,194	6
Leicestershire	389	—	—	—	1	—	—	5	382	2
Lincolnshire	223	—	—	—	1	1	—	12	204	5
Merseyside	904	1	1	6	2	2	—	12	610	278
City of London	372	—	—	1	—	12	—	10	350	2
Metropolitan Police	14,010	73	18	66	25	146	—	318	13,446	31
Norfolk	355	1	—	2	—	1	—	15	243	101
Northamptonshire	469	—	1	—	—	1	—	10	450	10
Northumbria	1,012	—	—	3	12	6	—	62	865	73
North Yorkshire	321	—	—	—	4	2	—	4	312	3
Nottinghamshire	418	—	1	—	2	—	—	17	370	30
South Yorkshire	854	3	2	9	14	2	—	51	787	5
Staffordshire	424	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	424	—
Suffolk	649	—	—	8	7	5	—	42	585	17
Surrey	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Sussex	991	4	—	6	12	7	—	80	911	7
Thames Valley	909	2	—	2	9	10	—	55	834	13
Warwickshire	414	—	—	—	13	6	—	32	356	8
West Mercia	903	1	—	5	13	2	—	43	840	24
West Midlands	1,852	3	5	13	17	8	—	66	1,633	107
West Yorkshire	667	1	—	14	5	3	—	43	588	18
Wiltshire	483	1	—	5	9	18	—	65	428	14
England	40,087	115	29	329	264	292	—	1,523	36,871	1,115
Dyfed-Powys	546	—	—	2	6	3	—	33	506	20
Gwent	509	—	—	—	1	—	—	8	502	—
North Wales	948	1	—	19	5	—	—	51	862	36
South Wales	512	—	—	—	1	—	—	9	500	2
Wales	2,515	1	—	21	13	3	—	101	2,370	58
England and Wales	42,602	116	29	350	277	295	—	1,624	39,241	1,173

[1] Columns cannot be added together since a person may be dealt with for more than one type of drug.
[2] This drug was not separately identified until 1995.

Number of persons proceeded against at Magistrates' Courts for possession of drugs by police force area and type of drug, 1994[1]

Police force area	Type of drug									
	All drugs	*Cocaine*	*Crack*	*Heroin*	*LSD*	*MDMA*	*Methadone*[2]	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other drugs*
Avon and Somerset	897	29	23	132	47	26	—	217	585	64
Bedfordshire	262	4	1	3	4	4	—	49	223	14
Cambridgeshire	421	11	1	4	11	11	—	119	329	26
Cheshire	1,052	44	—	217	33	39	—	157	721	40
Cleveland	277	2	—	3	16	12	—	125	168	11
Cumbria	696	3	—	21	21	23	—	106	597	60
Derbyshire	432	5	3	23	23	21	—	109	330	10
Devon and Cornwall	843	11	2	32	33	59	—	229	588	110
Dorset	378	12	1	36	15	7	—	67	292	27
Durham	374	3	2	—	22	20	—	132	236	22
Essex	703	30	—	15	18	38	—	147	532	64
Gloucestershire	266	5	—	13	11	10	—	58	227	8
Greater Manchester	2,472	54	30	420	50	43	—	489	1,634	102
Hampshire	1,048	24	—	31	34	40	—	259	831	53
Hertfordshire	523	13	—	12	25	25	—	100	433	3
Humberside	473	10	—	77	23	13	—	105	305	69
Kent	715	15	3	12	17	39	—	141	568	44
Lancashire	951	17	—	135	42	40	—	227	660	29
Leicestershire	370	8	5	10	15	8	—	75	293	46
Lincolnshire	430	2	—	9	21	5	—	121	335	9
Merseyside	2,266	77	23	260	41	42	—	227	1,541	294
City of London	78	9	3	3	5	7	—	9	57	—
Metropolitan Police	9,846	661	243	740	202	523	—	929	7,576	135
Norfolk	478	3	—	22	8	12	—	111	383	34
Northamptonshire	236	8	—	3	16	10	—	70	172	16
Northumbria	809	17	—	33	48	55	—	260	545	66
North Yorkshire	583	4	—	16	28	22	—	93	453	54
Nottinghamshire	913	20	—	21	55	19	—	214	655	114
South Yorkshire	1,013	17	9	98	57	59	—	305	690	37
Staffordshire	670	28	4	47	36	36	—	159	481	55
Suffolk	350	7	1	17	8	8	—	59	251	71
Surrey	355	13	1	14	17	22	—	81	295	8
Sussex	918	22	—	37	32	18	—	152	776	58
Thames Valley	1,424	46	8	59	47	76	—	243	1,181	38
Warwickshire	190	3	—	4	6	4	—	41	153	15
West Mercia	428	5	2	15	24	11	—	83	354	26
West Midlands	1,682	54	58	75	61	51	—	260	1,390	62
West Yorkshire	2,452	61	51	308	77	83	—	463	1,803	75
Wiltshire	152	2	—	6	5	5	—	40	107	14
England	38,426	1,359	474	2,983	1,254	1,546	—	6,831	28,750	1,983
Dyfed-Powys	471	39	—	11	32	12	—	97	373	47
Gwent	431	143	2	9	18	2	—	83	216	17
North Wales	736	1	—	39	28	9	—	123	599	58
South Wales	1,250	2	—	18	45	16	—	254	1,072	63
Wales	2,888	185	2	77	123	39	—	557	2,260	185
England and Wales	41,314	1,544	476	3,060	1,377	1,585	—	7,388	31,010	2,168

[1] Columns cannot be added together since a person may be dealt with for more than one type of drug.
[2] This drug was not separately identified until 1995.

Number of persons tried at the Crown Court for possession of drugs by police force area and type of drug, 1994[1]

Police force area	Type of drug									
	All drugs	*Cocaine*	*Crack*	*Heroin*	*LSD*	*MDMA*	*Methadone*[2]	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other drugs*
Avon and Somerset	185	9	—	12	25	16	—	67	129	24
Bedfordshire	33	—	—	2	1	1	—	10	30	2
Cambridgeshire	91	2	—	5	6	9	—	35	68	6
Cheshire	154	7	—	22	3	7	—	18	52	77
Cleveland	60	1	—	—	6	9	—	24	42	3
Cumbria	89	3	—	7	8	8	—	26	61	9
Derbyshire	87	2	—	3	4	7	—	24	64	6

Number of persons tried at the Crown Court for possession of drugs by police force area and type of drug, 1994[1]

Police force area	Type of drug									
	All drugs	*Cocaine*	*Crack*	*Heroin*	*LSD*	*MDMA*	*[2]Methadone*	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other drugs*
Devon and Cornwall	140	3	—	7	9	13	—	46	97	19
Dorset	41	2	—	6	3	2	—	5	30	—
Durham	47	—	—	—	6	7	—	22	31	2
Essex	94	9	—	9	4	11	—	15	54	21
Gloucestershire	28	3	—	4	2	2	—	7	23	4
Greater Manchester	381	20	5	86	15	16	—	102	223	12
Hampshire	153	8	—	8	10	17	—	52	118	8
Hertfordshire	32	1	—	2	2	5	—	4	23	—
Humberside	73	1	1	14	6	3	—	21	37	17
Kent	109	2	—	1	13	8	—	40	77	11
Lancashire	210	5	3	42	13	11	—	76	124	3
Leicestershire	63	3	2	1	6	5	—	24	43	6
Lincolnshire	66	—	—	2	5	6	—	24	50	5
Merseyside	183	18	3	34	4	6	—	35	104	28
City of London	8	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	6	—
Metropolitan Police	1,109	212	31	130	43	57	—	133	652	57
Norfolk	67	2	—	3	2	5	—	28	48	7
Northamptonshire	52	1	—	—	3	1	—	17	39	1
Northumbria	176	7	—	6	25	17	—	69	106	22
North Yorkshire	88	—	—	2	8	4	—	23	76	4
Nottinghamshire	154	11	—	6	23	12	—	56	116	4
South Yorkshire	160	6	1	17	19	16	—	72	95	2
Staffordshire	128	16	—	7	11	11	—	39	76	16
Suffolk	67	2	—	5	8	6	—	24	49	1
Surrey	54	6	—	1	6	6	—	18	40	5
Sussex	107	14	1	6	6	17	—	34	78	6
Thames Valley	111	10	—	4	10	18	—	37	84	5
Warwickshire	18	—	—	—	2	1	—	3	14	1
West Mercia	53	—	1	10	2	4	—	12	35	1
West Midlands	257	22	2	16	31	15	—	54	196	6
West Yorkshire	396	19	8	73	35	14	—	125	250	13
Wiltshire	13	—	—	—	—	2	—	3	6	4
England	5,337	429	58	553	385	375	—	1,424	3,446	418
Dyfed-Powys	35	1	—	3	2	2	—	9	27	8
Gwent	47	—	—	6	1	2	—	9	35	4
North Wales	62	—	—	8	4	2	—	15	47	4
South Wales	186	4	—	6	21	5	—	57	143	29
Wales	330	5	—	23	28	11	—	90	252	45
England and Wales	5,667	434	58	576	413	386	—	1,514	3,698	463

Notes:

[1] Columns cannot be added together since a person may be dealt with for more than one type of drug.

[2] This drug was not separately identified until 1995.

Number of persons cautioned for possession of drugs by police area and type of drug, 1995[1]

Police force area	Type of drugs									
	All drugs	*Cocaine*	*Crack*	*Heroin*	*LSD*	*MDMA*	*Methadone*	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other drugs*
Avon and Somerset	313		—	10	1	1	—	18	282	1
Hertfordshire	105	2	—	1	—	—	—	—	94	8
Cambridgeshire	388	1	—	1	—	—	—	4	384	—
Cheshire	665	2	—	28	1	10	1	26	590	7
Cleveland	490	—	—	3	1	6	—	38	418	29
Cumbria	352	—	—	2	2	5	—	20	327	3
Derbyshire	587	—	—	—	—	7	—	37	478	72
Devon and Cornwall	1,354	1	—	20	5	25	—	152	1,194	22
Dorset	198	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	197	—
Durham	239	—	—	—	—	2	—	23	217	—
Essex	991	7	—	14	4	7	—	87	903	6
Gloucestershire	654	4	—	1	3	3	—	49	612	3
Greater Manchester	2,604	12	5	244	10	28	1	242	2,032	30

Number of persons cautioned for possession of drugs by police area and type of drug, 1995[1]

Police force area	Type of drugs									
	All drugs	*Cocaine*	*Crack*	*Heroin*	*LSD*	*MDMA*	*Methadone*	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other drugs*
Hampshire	1,218	1	—	3	2	4	—	19	1,195	2
Hertfordshire	515	2	—	—	—	19	—	40	453	2
Humberside	322	—	—	3	—	—	—	12	304	6
Kent	713	16	1	1	1	3	—	20	672	6
Lancashire	1,530	2	—	42	12	11	—	91	1,365	19
Leicestershire	348	—	—	—	—	—	—	8	341	1
Lincolnshire	278	—	—	—	1	—	—	33	238	6
Merseyside	1,136	9	1	15	1	8	—	49	831	237
City of London	636	9	—	2	1	39	1	41	545	2
Metropolitan Police	15,483	147	40	174	36	337	—	562	14,298	113
Norfolk	702	—	—	4	1	21	—	89	513	118
Northamptonshire	554	—	—	—	1	—	—	6	540	10
Northumbria	1,691	—	—	13	3	30	—	158	1,236	275
North Yorkshire	332	—	—	6	1	—	—	14	315	1
Nottinghamshire	448	—	—	1	2	2	—	19	398	27
South Yorkshire	862	1	—	13	1	14	—	78	763	7
Staffordshire	520		—	1	1	1	—	33	478	6
Suffolk	630	1	—	10	3	20	—	54	544	13
Surrey	264	—	—	—	—	—	—	14	251	3
Sussex	1,142	10	—	18	6	5	—	104	1,034	10
Thames Valley	816	2	—	2	—	22	—	74	740	15
Warwickshire	569	2	—	2	6	26	—	53	471	9
West Mercia	999	1	—	13	3	15	—	84	897	22
West Midlands	1,702	2	4	7	8	13	—	73	1,530	66
West Yorkshire	811	3	—	15	4	17	—	57	707	13
Wiltshire	302	1	—	3	3	2	—	18	277	1
England	43,463	238	51	673	124	703	3	2,499	38,664	1,175
Dyfed-Powys	576	—	—	—	5	13	—	45	513	28
Gwent	516	—	—	—	1	—	—	5	510	3
North Wales	975	—	—	22	3	—	—	63	879	41
South Wales	648	—	—	1	12	3	—	47	589	5
Wales	2,716	—	—	23	21	16	—	160	2,491	77
England and Wales	46,178	238	51	696	145	719	8	2,659	41,155	1,252

[1] Columns cannot be added together since a person may be dealt with for more than one type of drug.

Number of persons proceeded against at Magistrates' Courts for possession of drugs by police force area and type of drug, 1995[1]

Police force area	Type of drug									
	All drugs	*Cocaine*	*Crack*	*Heroin*	*LSD*	*MDMA*	*Methadone*	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other drugs*
Avon and Somerset	1,066	152	21	188	17	48	2	189	649	80
Bedfordshire	393	5	—	10	6	13	—	71	345	26
Cambridgeshire	397	13	1	8	7	20	—	87	229	134
Cheshire	1,241	35	—	294	24	55	3	176	879	40
Cleveland	293	2	—	11	12	40	—	103	176	18
Cumbria	662	5	5	34	6	59	2	126	487	60
Derbyshire	530	3	—	17	17	39	—	164	397	20
Devon and Cornwall	1,084	15	2	55	28	67	—	256	706	205
Dorset	527	14	2	62	19	20	—	104	377	29
Durham	457	1	—	1	17	40	—	143	323	21
Essex	753	20	1	36	18	38	—	158	561	94
Gloucestershire	367	5	—	30	7	25	—	84	295	10
Greater Manchester	2,833	55	28	574	46	113	7	558	1,825	89
Hampshire	1,316	17	—	48	29	63	—	292	1,030	96
Hertfordshire	599	19	—	33	15	48	—	109	505	9
Humberside	643	10	1	103	14	20	—	142	399	106
Kent	660	9	1	24	11	11	—	131	506	49
Lancashire	1,409	17	7	232	33	63	1	308	945	77
Leicestershire	505	10	7	13	22	19	—	142	391	29
Lincolnshire	425	—	—	4	11	24	—	116	319	28
Merseyside	2,354	89	29	283	21	79	3	192	1,627	278
City of London	164	15	—	4	6	23	—	27	125	2

Number of persons proceeded against at Magistrates' Courts for possession of drugs by police force area and type of drug, 1995[1]

Police force area	Type of drug									
	All drugs	*Cocaine*	*Crack*	*Heroin*	*LSD*	*MDMA*	*Methadone*	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other drugs*
Metropolitan Police	8,481	652	250	834	124	554	3	779	6,242	139
Norfolk	560	4	9	15	5	10	—	83	500	19
Northamptonshire	272	7	—	13	9	9	—	72	195	27
Northumbria	825	8	—	13	14	46	—	108	370	377
North Yorkshire	569	3	1	31	14	20	—	108	450	33
Nottinghamshire	1,066	27	1	29	22	41	—	246	784	122
South Yorkshire	1,386	11	26	237	25	96	8	357	885	37
Staffordshire	818	22	7	115	18	66	2	153	536	71
Suffolk	432	13	—	34	7	26	—	92	323	40
Surrey	414	15	3	23	12	29	1	65	356	9
Sussex	993	43	7	78	28	26	—	224	808	60
Thames Valley	1,605	50	10	99	41	150	—	280	1,250	36
Warwickshire	199	1	—	—	7	3	—	45	162	22
West Mercia	617	5	1	21	27	33	—	130	507	35
West Midlands	1,649	41	40	97	32	85	—	288	1,354	55
West Yorkshire	2,720	55	17	548	30	122	—	473	1,807	129
Wiltshire	171	7	—	7	5	12	—	38	120	22
England	41,455	1,475	477	4,258	806	2,255	32	7,219	29,745	2,733
Dyfed-Powys	648	45	—	7	19	47	—	147	512	47
Gwent	478	62	3	14	13	18	—	148	295	22
North Wales	777	8	2	52	20	14	—	167	607	58
South Wales	1,484	8	—	25	52	44	1	379	1,234	64
Wales	3,387	123	5	98	104	123	1	841	2,648	191
England and Wales	44,842	1,598	482	4,356	910	2,378	33	8,060	32,393	2,924

[1] Columns cannot be added together since a person may be dealt with for more than one type of drug.

Number of persons tried at the Crown Court for possession of drugs by police force area and type of drug, 1995[1]

Police force area	Type of drug									
	All drugs	*Cocaine*	*Crack*	*Heroin*	*LSD*	*MDMA*	*Methadone*	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other drugs*
Avon and Somerset	164	14	4	19	9	12	—	31	111	27
Bedfordshire	58	2	1	—	1	5	—	9	46	5
Cambridgeshire	91	3	2	1	5	8	—	37	67	11
Cheshire	255	8	1	39	7	17	—	49	127	72
Cleveland	81	2	—	4	6	9	—	32	38	14
Cumbria	62	1	—	5	2	9	—	21	40	9
Derbyshire	126	2	—	5	8	17	—	48	79	20
Devon and Cornwall	148	7	—	7	5	16	—	44	100	15
Dorset	71	5	—	6	3	6	—	14	49	4
Durham	56	2	—	—	4	10	—	22	31	7
Essex	167	11	—	5	9	25	—	51	114	20
Gloucestershire	48	3	—	4	—	4	—	18	36	3
Greater Manchester	537	38	12	126	16	30	—	128	321	25
Hampshire	189	5	—	2	5	16	—	42	147	25
Hertfordshire	77	8	—	4	3	10	—	14	49	13
Humberside	142	5	1	27	6	8	—	40	77	28
Kent	146	4	2	10	5	8	—	37	96	19
Lancashire	258	11	—	37	10	22	—	78	163	15
Leicestershire	62	—	—	—	5	5	—	18	53	6
Lincolnshire	72	1	—	—	3	5	—	32	54	8
Merseyside	275	35	9	40	17	23	—	58	153	18
City of London	13	4	—	1	1	2	—	1	10	—
Metropolitan Police	1,216	179	66	154	40	120	2	133	735	113
Norfolk	91	3	—	9	8	9	—	20	63	12
Northamptonshire	48	—	—	2	1	2	—	15	32	5
Nurthumbria	178	4	—	8	10	30	—	74	105	22
North Yorkshire	94	1	—	6	8	11	—	21	68	11
Nottinghamshire	185	7	2	9	14	11	—	57	119	17
South Yorkshire	209	5	2	42	11	20	—	73	121	18

Number of persons tried at the Crown Court for possession of drugs by police force area and type of drug, 1995[1]

Police force area	*Type of drug*									
	All drugs	*Cocaine*	*Crack*	*Heroin*	*LSD*	*MDMA*	*Methadone*	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other drugs*
Staffordshire	164	10	3	29	9	22	—	44	100	32
Suffolk	98	8	—	8	2	15	—	42	72	9
Surrey	101	4	1	6	3	8	—	21	81	17
Sussex	148	18	—	9	4	21	—	44	114	18
Thames Valley	194	23	9	19	16	40	—	58	119	15
Warwickshire	31	1	—	—	2	2	—	10	23	4
West Mercia	86	6	2	3	5	10	—	17	67	14
West Midlands	308	31	6	25	18	26	—	77	215	27
West Yorkshire	468	30	10	70	23	37	—	114	303	45
Wiltshire	32	1	—	—	4	7	—	10	18	9
England	6,749	502	133	741	308	658	2	1,654	4,316	752
Dyfed-Powys	47	—	—	—	6	5	—	12	39	8
Gwent	64	—	1	4	4	4	—	19	45	11
North Wales	87	—	1	10	10	9	—	32	58	7
South Wales	215	4	—	5	29	9	—	79	170	26
Wales	413	4	2	19	49	27	—	142	312	52
England and Wales	7,162	506	135	760	357	685	2	1,796	4,628	804

[1] Columns cannot be added together since a person may be dealt with for more than one type of drug.

Deportations

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 12 June, *Official Report*, column *510*, how many persons removed from the United Kingdom in each of the last five years under the deportation process made a voluntary departure. [4835]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the list:

Voluntary departures from the United Kingdom after deportation action had been initiated, 1992–96.

1992: 94

1993: 208

1994: 271

1995: 365

1996[1]: 355.

[1] Provisional

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many decisions to make a deportation order (form APP 104) have been issued in each month of 1997 to date; [4731]

(2) how many deportation orders have been signed by Ministers in each month of 1997 to date. [4730]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested for Janaury to May 1997 is given in the table:

Persons issued, under the deportation process, with a notice of intention to deport (form APP 104) and deportation orders signed by Ministers[1] January to May 1997

	APP 104 issued	*Deportation orders signed*
January	480	105
February	490	92
March	539	91
April	492	122
May	270	49

[1] Provisional data.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 12 June, *Official Report*, column *510*, how many decisions to make a deportation order (form APP 104) were issued in each of the last five years. [4834]

Mr. O'Brien: The information requested is given in the list:

Persons issued, under the deportation process, with a notice of intention to deport (form APP 104), 1992–1996.

1992: 3,594

1993: 4,283

1994: 5,421

1995: 5,274

1996[1]: 6,518.

[1] Provisional data.

Polygraphs

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what use his Department makes of polygraphs, and if he will make a statement. [4585]

Mr. Straw: None, so far as I and my official have been able to ascertain. The Home Office does not encourage the use of polygraph testing for decision making on employment screening or security vetting. The Home Office's views on the use of polygraphs are broadly in accordance with those of the Scientific Affairs Board of the British Psychological Society. We have concern with regard to polygraphs' use of non-standardised administration procedures; internal inconsistency; unreliable rescoring of charts; insufficient evidence of retest reliability provided for examinees; disproportionate numbers of false positive results produced; absence of data on the adverse impact on minority groups; seemingly non-voluntary participation of examinees; and its sensitivity to aspects of temperament.

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the advantages of admitting in evidence the results of polygraph tests; and if he will make a statement. [4583]

Mr. Michael: I have made no assessment of the admissibility of polygraph tests as evidence in criminal trials. The courts have held that, as a matter of principle, evidence produced by mechanical, chemical or hypnotic truth test on a witness is inadmissible to show the veracity or otherwise of that witness.

Under the general rules of evidence, the previous statements of a witness are inadmissible as hearsay and also, where such statements are consistent with his oral testimony, they are inadmissible as evidence of consistency under the rule against previous self-serving statements.

Electro-shock Devices

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what was the cost to central funds of the Hard Arrest programme; and what further research has been carried out on the operation, safety or use of electro-shock equipment; [3817]

(2) what was the duration of the Hard Arrests trial programme; and what equipment, policy issues and training were involved. [3816]

Mr. Michael: I understand that these questions relate to the possible development of electric shock shields for use against people. Neither my Department nor the police service have any knowledge of the Hard Arrests trial programme, or of any other programme of development, testing or training in the use of such equipment in this country.

Chief officers of police, with their police authorities, are responsible for deciding what equipment to obtain for their officers, either for testing or for introduction. A number of forces have electric-shock shields and cattle prods for use against ferocious dogs, but no force has such equipment for use against people.

In 1990, the Forensic Science Service published a theoretical assessment of the effects of electric shock weapons.

Departmental Advisers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the special advisers in his Department, the minister to whom each is responsible, the subjects on which they advise and the number of advisers in his Department in the year up to 1 May. [5362]

Mr. Straw: I have two special advisers, Mr. Ed Owen and Mr. Norman Warner. They are employed under terms and conditions based on the model contract for special advisers, a copy of which has been placed in the Library. Mr. Owen and Mr. Warner are advising me on all subjects relevant to the Department, save those of a confidential nature, in accordance with Schedule 1 (Part 1) of the Model Contract.

In the year to 1 May 1997, there were two special advisers.

Protection from Harassment Act

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the definition of violence his Department uses in interpreting section 4(1) (4) (2) of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. [4846]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 20 June 1997]:* Section 4 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 makes it a criminal offence for a person to pursue a course of conduct which they know, or ought to know, causes another to fear that violence will be used against him or her. The offence is intended to catch the most serious cases of stalking, where the stalker's conduct is so threatening that the victim fears for his or her safety.

The Act does not define "violence", nor is there any guidance on the meaning of the term in the circular issued by the Home Office to the courts and police for the implementation of the Act on 16 June. The courts already have long experience of interpreting the term and should continue to exercise that judgment in cases arising under section 4 of the 1997 Act. Violence does not need to be established to prove an offence under section 4: fear of violence will suffice.

Under the 1997 Act there will be scope for early intervention, in the form of the offence of causing harassment and a restraining order on conviction to prevent further harm being caused, which is designed to prevent the harassment escalating any further.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Sustainable Development

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on how his plans for *(a)* employment, *(b)* training and *(c)* education will incorporate the principles of sustainable development. [3581]

Dr. Howells: Although few of DfEE's policies have any significant impact on the environment, DfEE is committed to the principles of sustainable development.

We are currently setting up the Environmental Task Force (ETF), as part of the New Deal which will provide valuable work experience and training for unemployed young people. The ETF will provide a range of placements to help the local community, such as tree planting, energy efficiency measures and landscaping.

We have an environmental National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) framework and a Modern Apprenticeship NVQ Level 3 in Environmental Conservation.

We issue guidance to schools to enable them to monitor their own energy use as well as provide opportunities for pupils to learn about the environment. We are also considering the establishment of a national panel to co-ordinate environmental education and will announce our intentions in due course.

Training and Enterprise Councils

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much each training and enterprise council has spent on special needs training in each of the last three years. [4168]

Dr. Howells: The information requested is not available. Separate accounts for TEC expenditure on those with special needs are not maintained. The Department's contract with TECs does however specify a number of targets which ensures that special needs are given prominence.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the comparative performance of individual TECs; and if he will make a statement. [4620]

Dr. Howells: The performance of individual TECs varies across the range of activities in which they are involved. The Department intends to work with the TEC National Council and the wider TEC network to improve the performance of all TECs through, for example, benchmarking and the sharing of best practice more effectively.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what external audits have been carried out since 1 January 1995 into the use of public money by Sussex Enterprise. [5195]

Dr. Howells: Sussex Enterprise, like other Training and Enterprise Councils, is subject to audit by the FAM (Financial Management) team of the relevant Government Office, at least annually.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what balances were held by Sussex Enterprise and its predecessor Sussex TEC at the end of each of the last five financial years; what this figure represents as a percentage of turnover for each year; and if he will make a statement. [5194]

Dr. Howells: These figures are available from the published annual reports, copies of which are available in the Library.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what safeguards exist to ensure the proper and effective use of public money by Sussex Enterprise. [5193]

Dr. Howells: Sussex Enterprise, like all other TECs, is under a general/contractual obligation from the Secretary of State to have sound financial controls and to provide value for money on all expenditure on government programmes.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make it his policy to require representation at member level for local authorities on the boards of TECs; and if he will make a statement. [5192]

Dr. Howells: The contract the Department has with TECs requires that at least two-thirds of the Directors hold the office of chairman, or chief executive, or top level operational manager at local level of a company, or senior partner of a professional partnership in the private sector. The remaining Directors must be senior figures within the local community, which includes members of local authorities. I will be reviewing the arrangements with the TEC National Council over the coming months to decide whether any changes are appropriate.

University Degrees

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans his Department has to control the quality of university degrees delivered on-line *(a)* in part or *(b)* in full. [4734]

Dr. Howells: The quality of degrees is a matter for universities and other institutions with degree-awarding powers. The Secretary of State expects to ask the newly established Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education to address issues relating to the quality and standards of degrees, taking into account the forthcoming report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education.

Drug Abuse

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to increase awareness among students in higher education of the dangers of drug abuse. [5082]

Mr. Howells: Higher Education Institutions are independent autonomous bodies. They contribute to the effort to tackle drug misuse by individually adopting rules governing the prohibition of drugs from college premises and disciplinary sanctions. They also provide welfare and counselling services for their students. The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and the Standing Conference of Principals were invited to encourage the higher education sector to provide appropriate prevention, counselling and support services for their students and to put in hand whatever further action they considered to be necessary.

The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and the Standing Conference of Principals published guidance on 20 June 1997 on information provision and education for students and staff, support infrastructure (internal and external), disciplinary procedures, staff awareness and training, liaison between institutions and local community expertise. The guidance was issued to all higher education institutions in the UK and to all members of the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education.

The Government will be appointing a 'drug czar' to co-ordinate our action against drugs. One of his or her first tasks will be to revise urgently the existing drugs strategy, and put forward proposals for tackling the problem with renewed vigour.

Education Action Zones

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria he will set for the establishment of education action zones. [4890]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 20 June 1997]:* We shall set out our plans for education action zones in the Education White Paper, which will be published shortly.

Key Stage 2

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he asked the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority to look into the national curriculum for key stage 2; whether SCAA has been advised to make key stage 2 less prescriptive to

allow for greater concentration on numeracy and literacy; and when he expects SCAA to report on this matter. [5353]

Ms Estelle Morris: I wrote to SCAA's Chairman on 9 June asking for his interim report, due in August, to inform my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on how a sharper focus on literacy and numeracy can be achieved in key stages 1 and 2 through non-statutory means.

My letter asked for a range of specific options to be considered, including the place for explicit guidance on the minimum that needs to be done to cover the National Curriculum in non-core subjects.

Further Education Colleges

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to improve the public accountability of colleges of further education. [4621]

Dr. Howells: I refer to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan), *Official Report*, 16 June 1997, column *48*.

Racial Discrimination

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the level of racial discrimination in the labour market; and if he will make a statement. [4853]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Recent research and industrial tribunal cases show that racial discrimination in the labour market remains a matter of serious concern.

I deplore racial discrimination and racial harassment. I will ensure that my actions and those of the Department play their part in combating unfair treatment. Current action to promote race equality includes: the work of the Race Relations Employment Advisory Service, DfEE booklets on equal opportunities, and conferences in partnership with the Commission for Racial Equality and other key players.

I am pleased that the Department is setting an example to other employers by becoming a Champion of the Race for Opportunity campaign, promoting racial equality to employers.

I will be meeting Sir Herman Ouseley in the near future to discuss further ways in which the Department can work with the CRE to combat discrimination.

Young People

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his estimate of the number of 16 and 17-year-olds who are currently not in full-time education, in work or on a training place; and if he will make a statement. [4855]

Dr. Howells: In winter 1996–97 there were 142,000 16 and 17-year-olds not in full-time education, in employment, or in Government Training in the UK, according to the Labour Force Survey.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the use of discretion by jobcentre staff in applying postal signing rules for the jobseeker's allowance for claimants with high travelling costs; and if he will issue guidance. [4872]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Lembit Öpik, dated 24 June 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about the postal signing rules. This is something that falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

Under our present rules a person claiming Jobseeker's Allowance whose normal journey to their Jobcentre would take more than one hour in either direction, or would entail an absence from home of four hours or more, is allowed to sign on by post. People whose mobility is affected by a disability may also be allowed to sign on by post.

In addition Jobcentre Managers do have discretion to allow postal signing in other circumstances. The relevant guidance, which is contained within the Employment Service's Jobseeker's Allowance Interventions Guide, chapter 20, paragraph 3, states that:

'Business Managers may also use some discretion in offering the postal facility to other jobseekers, even if their journey is possible within the time limits in paragraph 2, (i.e., their journey time is less than 1 hour in either direction or they would be absent from home for less than 4 hours.) For example, if the jobseeker would have to use a form of transport which they could not be expected to use on a fortnightly basis, for example, an InterCity train, a ferry or a plane'.

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many young people are currently receiving the jobseeker's allowance, under the severe hardship provision or receiving a bridging allowance; and if he will make a statement. [4852]

Mr. Howarth: There were 16,000 young people aged 16 and 17 years old receiving jobseeker's allowance (JSA) in February 1997, the latest date for which figures are available. The vast majority of these young people would have been receiving JSA because they would otherwise have faced severe hardship.

There were 5,150 young people receiving a Youth Training Bridging Allowance in May 1997.

Vocational Courses

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the implications of recent changes to the Education (Mandatory Awards) Regulations 1995 for vocational courses involving work experience and a work placement; and if he will make a statement. [5110]

Dr. Howells: The changes made to the provisions governing sandwich courses in the Regulations will not take effect until 1 September 1997. They were made in order to clarify the provisions in the current Regulations, which were unsatisfactory and unclear. I am aware that certain courses which contain a period of full-time study at an institution that aggregates to less than 19 weeks per

academic year may be adversely affected by the changes. I am currently considering the effect of the changes on these courses.

Nursery Education

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will ensure that all nursery providers currently registered under the Nursery Voucher Scheme are eligible for funding under the new arrangements whether or not they are included in a local education authority interim development plan. [5198]

Mr. Byers: It is for education authorities to submit interim early years for development plans. All existing providers in the voucher scheme are eligible, and local authorities have been asked to give convincing reasons fornotincludingthem.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Social Chapter

Sir Richard Body: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the implementation of the social chapter through European Union legislation. [4460]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Agreement was reached at the Amsterdam summit to incorporate the agreement on social policy into the treaty and to give the UK an immediate seat at the negotiating table, before the new treaty comes into force.

The Government said at Amsterdam that they will implement the two directives already adopted under the social agreement. The details of how the directives, on European Works Councils and Parental Leave, are to apply to the UK will be agreed before the signature of the new treaty.

"Britain: The Preferred Location in Europe"

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when the document "Britain: The Preferred Location in Europe" was published. [4745]

Mrs. Roche: The document, "Britain: The Preferred Location in Europe" was published on 23 May 1997.

National Physical Laboratory (Land Disposal)

Dr. Cable: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the compliance of her policy in disposing of surplus land on the National Physical Laboratory site at Teddington with the unitary development plan of the local planning authority. [4588]

Mr. Battle: Final bids under the public private partnership for the redevelopment of the National Physical Laboratory site will not be available for assessment until the beginning of July. We have made tenderers aware of the need to take account of land planning policies in completing their bids.

Indonesia

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many export licences were granted in each year since 1990 for the export of police or paramilitary training equipment to Indonesia; what public funds were involved in such transactions; and if she will make a statement. [1832]

Mrs. Roche: There is no category within the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 from which police or paramilitary training equipment can be readily identified. To search export licence records for this purpose would entail disproportionate cost.

As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced on 22 May, *Official Report*, column *135*, the Government have initiated an urgent review of the criteria used in considering licence applications for the export of conventional arms. The new criteria will be made available to the House when the review is complete. In the meantime, officials will consult Ministers whenever there are export licence applications which may raise concerns about human rights or international stability.

Chemical Weapons Convention

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of Britain's progress in implementing the chemical weapons convention 1996; and if she will make a statement regarding the identification and recording of manufacture, holdings and transfer of law enforcement and riot control agents and chemical irritants. [3583]

Mrs. Roche: The United Kingdom has made substantial progress in implementing the chemical weapons convention which entered into force on 29 April. The Chemical Weapons Act 1996 provides the legislative framework to implement the convention. All the necessary secondary legislation has been made to enable my Department to license the production, possession and use of the most toxic chemicals and to implement the convention's trade controls. The United Kingdom submitted its initial declaration to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) on 27 May and preparations are well advanced to receive the first inspection under the convention.

The holding of riot control agents for law enforcement purposes is permitted under the convention and the United Kingdom has declared to the OPCW the chemicals which are held for this purpose. There is no requirement under the convention to declare information concerning the manufacture and transfer of such agents.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Cotter: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps are being taken to advise small businesses of the problems likely to occur with their computer systems as a result of the year 2000 problem. [5317]

Mr. Battle: My Department is working closely with Taskforce 2000, a body set up by the CBI and the IT industry, with our financial support, to spread awareness of the century date change problem to all levels of industry and co-ordinate action. A senior DTI official is seconded to the Taskforce, working through Business Link and their counterparts in Scotland and Wales, specifically to focus on alerting SMEs.

In March 1997, DTI wrote to 120,000 UK Chief Executives drawing their attention to the issue and offering a DTI information pack containing advice and sources of help. To date, over 15,000 information packs have been distributed.

Officials are also working with the accounting and auditing professions to ensure that, as far as possible, all business in the UK are aware of the implications.

Fuel Poverty

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what proposals she has to eliminate fuel poverty; and if she will make a statement. [4395]

Mr. Battle: We have made a commitment in our Manifesto to reduce poverty and welfare dependency: this commitment cuts across a number of policy areas, including energy. We are considering how to achieve that overall Manifesto commitment. In the energy field, competition is already bringing lower prices to many consumers; and we aim to ensure that these benefits are shared by all consumers, including those on low incomes. To inform our future policies, I have asked the gas and electricity regulators for a report on how competition will impact on people taking their supply via a prepayment meter.

Auditors

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what proposals for the reform of audit regulation will accompany her proposals for limited liability partnerships for auditing work. [4288]

Mr. Ian McCartney: My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade will be considering the content of the draft legislation on limited liability partnership in the light of all the representations received.

Atomic Energy

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is her Department's policy on the duration of contracts *(a)* British Nuclear Fuels and *(b)* the Atomic Energy Authority may sign with foreign companies for the storage of spent nuclear fuel at (i) Sellafield and (ii) Dounreay. [4304]

Mr. Battle: British Nuclear Fuel's contracts with foreign companies are only for reprocessing spent nuclear fuel at Sellafield. The fuel is stored awaiting reprocessing in Thorp. The duration of storage is a commercial matter for the company involved. Similarly, UKAEA imports spent nuclear fuel only for reprocessing and not for storage. It should be noted that there is only a limited capacity for the temporary storage of nuclear fuels prior to reprocessing so it is in the commercial interests of both organisations to make optimum use of this.

Cash Limits

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what changes will be made to cash and running cost limits within her responsibility for 1997–98. [5548]

Mrs. Beckett: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class IV, vote 1—programmes and administration—will be increased by a token amount of £1,000. This increase results from:

(i) the transfer of responsibility for the Competitiveness Unit to the Department of Trade and Industry from the Cabinet Office: Office of Public Service (Class XVII, Vote 1) resulting in an increase of £1,694,000 to vote section C (Departmental capital and administration) offset by a payment of £1,693,000 from the Cabinet Office under a new vote section M of class IV, vote 1; and,

(ii) an increase of £270,000 to the Iron and Steel Employees Readaptation Benefits Scheme offset by a corresponding increase in individual industry receipts under section B of the Vote.

Within this total, the gross running cost limit for the Department of Trade and Industry is being increased by £1,692,000 from £365,001,000 to £366,693,000 as a result of the Competitiveness Unit transfer.

Also, subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class IV, vote 9—Office of Gas Supply—will be increased by £1,975,000 from £8,100,000 to £10,075,000 and the running cost limit by £1,975,000 from £9,437,000 to £11,412,000. The requirement for an increase results from an increase in running costs associated with the introduction of domestic competition.

The DTI token increase will be offset by savings, and the OFGAS increase will be charged to the Reserve. Neither will therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Kenya

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the current level of trade between Britain and Kenya; and what is the current balance of imports and exports between Britain and Kenya. [4910]

Mrs. Roche: In 1996, the value of UK exports of goods to Kenya was £241 million, a slight decrease on 1995. UK imports increased, by 18 per cent., to £191 million. The crude balance of trade in goods decreased, from a surplus of £82 million in 1995, to £50 million in 1996.

Post Office

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to amend the legal immunities of the Post Office in respect of the services it provides. [4981]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Post Office's immunity from contractual liability for ordinary post was granted by Parliament in the Post Office Act 1969 because of the very high volumes of mail handled and essentially unrestricted access to posting at over 100,000 pillar boxes and over 19,000 post offices.

In view of the fact that individual recording of each letter would be impracticable and would give rise both to substantial delays and large increases in costs, Parliament took the view that the acceptance of liability by the Post Office, without proof of posting or delivery, could give rise to an escalating level of fraudulent claims and to high costs which could be met only by a substantial increase in the standard letter tariffs. It is the Government's view

that the vast majority of mail users would not wish to see much higher tariffs or to obtain proof of posting for all items posted as the price for abolishing the Post Office's immunity. We therefore have no plans to introduce legislation to do so.

Nuclear Power Stations

Mr. Baker: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list for each operating nuclear power station in Britain (i) its year of construction, (ii) the year it began supplying electricity to the national grid, (iii) its anticipated decommissioning date at year of construction, (iv) its actual decommissioning date, if now decommissioned and (v) its expected decommissioning date at the present time. [4638]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 20 June 1997]:* Dates for the start of construction, first commercial operation and date of shutdown, where applicable, for nuclear power stations operating in Britain are given in the 1997 World Nuclear Industry Handbook extracts of which are reproduced in the following table.

Nuclear stations are subject to constant review by the regulatory authorities through a closely monitored licencing system, which ensures that the companies owning these power stations can only operate them for as long as it is safe to do so. Anticipated lifetimes when these stations were first built were based on the technological and economic estimates made at that time and typically ranged between 20 and 30 years.

The decommissioning of nuclear power stations is undertaken by agreement with the regulatory authorities, the Nuclear Industries Inspectorate and the Environment Agency, to ensure that environmental, safety and economic concerns are fully taken into account.

Station	*Construction began*	*Commercial operation*	*Shutdown*
Dungeness B1	1966	1985	—
Dungeness B2	1966	1988	—
Hartlepool 1	1968	1984	—
Hartlepool 2	1968	1985	—
Heysham 1-1	1970	1984	—
Heysham 1-2	1970	1985	—
Heysham 2-1	1980	1988	—
Heysham 2-2	1980	1989	—
Hinkley Point B3	1967	1978	—
Hinkley Point B4	1967	1976	—
Hunterston B1	1967	1976	—
Hunterston B2	1967	1977	—
Torness 1	1980	1988	—
Torness 2	1980	1989	—
Bradwell 1	1957	1962	—
Bradwell 2	1957	1962	—
Calder Hall 1	1953	1956	—
Calder Hall 2	1953	1957	—
Calder Hall 3	1953	1958	—
Calder Hall 4	1953	1959	—
Chalpelcross 1	1956	1959	—
Chalpelcross 2	1956	1959	—
Chalpelcross 3	1956	1960	—
Chalpelcross 4	1956	1960	—
Dungeness A1	1960	1965	—
Dungeness A2	1960	1965	—
Hinkley Point A1	1957	1965	—
Hinkley Point A2	1957	1965	—
Oldbury 1	1962	1968	—
Oldbury 2	1962	1968	—
Sizewell A1	1961	1966	—
Sizewell A2	1961	1966	—
Wylfa A1	1963	1971	—
Wylfa A2	1963	1972	—
Sizewell B	1988	1995	—
Windscale AGR	1958	1983	1981
Dounreay DRF	1966	1962	1977
Dounreay PFR	1967	1976	1994
Winfrith Dragon	n/a	n/a	1976
Berkeley 1	1957	1962	1989
Berkeley 2	1957	1962	1988
Hunterston A1	1957	1964	1990
Hunterston A2	1957	1964	1989
Trawsfyndd 1	1959	1965	1993
Trawsfyndd 2	1959	1965	1993
Winfrith SGHWR	1963	1968	1990

Political Parties (Donations)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will introduce legislation requiring companies to undertake a ballot of all *(a)* shareholders and *(b)* employees before making donations to political parties. [4816]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 23 June 1997]:* The Government gave a commitment in the Queen's Speech that they would consider how the funding of political parties should be regulated and reformed.

Social Chapter

Mr. Rooney: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to introduce legislation incorporating the social chapter into British law. [4926]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 23 June 1997]:* Following signature of the new treaty, which incorporates the agreement on social policy, the Government expect to introduce in the autumn a Bill to amend as necessary the European Communities Act 1972.

The Government have undertaken to implement the two directives which have been adopted under the agreement on social policy within two years of the signature of the new treaty or when it enters into force if that is later.

Oil Exploration

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment her Department has made of the environmental impact of drilling for oil in the Atlantic. [4402]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 23 June 1997]:* In deciding which blocks to offer for licenee in the 17th round, the Department of Trade and Industry took account of advice from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, its principal adviser on environmental matters, relevant Government Departments and environmental groups. Blocks awarded for licence in the round are subject to

conditions which seek to mitigate any possible adverse environmental impact of petroleum activities. The conditions were agreed with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

Defence-related Jobs

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what estimate she has made of the total number of people employed on defence-related jobs in British manufacturing industry. [4753]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 23 June 1997]:* In 1994–95, 360,000 jobs in UK industry were estimated to be dependent on defence expenditure and equipment exports.

Source: UK Defence Statistics 1996, MoD.

TREASURY

Bank of England

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to answer the question tabled on 2 June by the right hon. Member for Llanelli relating to the proposed legislation transferring to the Bank of England operational responsibilities for the setting of interest rates. [5339]

Mrs. Liddell: I did so on 20 June.

Gini Coefficient

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the current Gini coefficient for each member state of the European Union. [3442]

Mrs. Liddell: International comparisons of income distribution are difficult to make and there are no officially recognised current estimates of Gini coefficients for each member state of the European Union. Estimates of Gini coefficients for the early 1990's, using data from the Luxembourg Income Survey, have recently been published in an article "Poverty in the UK: A Comparison with Nineteen Other Countries" by Jonathan Bradshaw and Jun-Rong Chen. This can be found in the January 1997 issue of "Benefits", a journal published by Nottingham University, which is available in the House of Commons Library.

Income Support

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer at what stage in the annual public expenditure cycle it is appropriate for him to discuss openly the resources of households with children above income support levels. [3964]

Mr. Darling: There is not going to be a Public Expenditure Survey in 1997. If the hon. Member wants to make representations to my right hon. Friend then he is free to do so.

Internet

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what use he plans to make of the Internet to make Government more open. [5098]

Mrs. Liddell: The Treasury's Internet site (http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk) has received various commendations and awards, and has been warmly received by the public. The site offers a wide range of information and documentation, which we are committed to expanding the scope of further. Some of the information already published on the site includes all Treasury news releases, speeches, consultation documents, and Treasury occasional papers. Next week, shortly after the Chancellor finishes his statement, we shall be making the speech and the related Budget documentation available on the site. In the 1996 Budget week the site was accessed almost 400,000 times, up from 250,000 accesses in 1995. We expect even greater levels of interest next week.

Personal Pensions (Misselling)

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what responses the Treasury has received in reply to the initiative on misselling of personal pensions announced by the Economic Secretary to the Treasury on 14 May. [5472]

Mrs. Liddell: On 14 May I spoke to senior representatives of the 24 firms which are together responsible for nearly three-quarters of the cases requiring review under the terms of the guidance issued by the Securities and Investments Board (SIB). I told them of the Government's concern about the delays in completing these case reviews and challenged them to perform to better standards than those expected in the targets set by SIB and the Personal Investment Authority (PIA) for each firm. I also made clear that, in the public interest, I plan to publish regular information about each firm's progress.

I am placing copies of my letters to these firms in the Library of the House. In them I asked for information about their strategies for case reviews and for monthly information about progress with cases. In the letters, I set out my intention to publish the information provided, firm by firm, in the spirit of open government, and in the interests of the investors and the investing public generally. I now have replies from all 24 firms. I am placing copies in the Library of the House and making them available to the press.

Most of these replies suggest a willingness to deliver the targets for completion of case reviews set by the regulators. A number of companies claim to have adopted practices which will hasten the conclusion of case reviews. These include providing additional staff, placing responsibility with a director and outsourcing expertise where there are resource constraints. I regret that some firms place more emphasis on the impediments to progress such as information flows and the scarcity of appropriate expertise. It is important that case reviews are treated as a matter of priority so that investors can be reassured that their pensions are secure.

There are also some indications that firms are adopting, or considering, accelerated case management techniques which will improve the speed of case handling without prejudicing investors' rights. Such methods include waiving consideration of whether sales procedures were strictly at fault; use of automatic formulae to top up certain smaller cases; and potentially guarantees which will ensure that investors will either get reinstatement into occupational schemes or equivalent treatment where that proves impossible. I shall be looking for evidence that

firms are showing their sincerity and commitment to customer service while moving quickly to adopt such streamlined procedures.

While most of the policy statements sent to me showed a businesslike sense of purpose, I regret that there are two which appear to misunderstand the Government's determination that this matter must be resolved with dispatch. The Sedgwick Group is quite wrong to assert that the Government's initiative on 14 May was in any way under-researched. And I am not convinced by the objections of the board of Legal and General to well merited criticisms of the industry's performance so far.

When I met these firms on 14 May I made clear that, in the public interest, I would review progress each month and publish information monthly about the progress being made by each firm toward delivery of the regulators' targets. Some firms have already demonstrated that the pace of their reviews is quickening. I trust that this trend will accelerate over the months to come. But progress must not be made through shortcuts achieved to the detriment of investors' rights. Any attempt of this nature will quickly be picked up by the quality control process which the regulators will carry out at my request.

When I review the progress made by each of the 24 firms each month, I will consider what further action may be called for if I am not convinced of their good intentions. I wish the first reports to be available to me by 3 July, and each month thereafter. It is now urgent that the pensions industry honours its commitments and puts its house in order. Only in that way can it assure its customers, and indeed the general public, of its ability to look after their interests responsibly.

Interest Rates

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for each year since 1970 *(a)* the nominal and real rate of interest and *(b)* the change in the nominal and real rate of exchange based on relative unit values for manufactures based on the second half of 1973 equals 100. [2025]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Austin Mitchell, dated 24 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question (2025) on the nominal and real rate of interest.

The attached table shows nominal and real rates of interest for the dates requested. The real rate of interest is the nominal rate of interest deflated by a measure of price change over 12 months. There are many different interest rates and price indices and therefore many ways of calculating real interest rates. However, interest rates move in line and thus overall movements provide an accurate indication of general movements.

The retail banks' base rate was used to represent the interest rate. This is the rate of interest retail banks lend to each other and can be considered the market interest rate for the UK economy. It moves in line with the Bank of England's Minimum Lending Rate (the minimum rate the Bank discounted bills to relieve money market shortages), which represents the cost of borrowing for retail banks from the Bank.

The nominal rate of interest was deflated by the average annual change in the retail prices index excluding mortgage interest payments (RPIX), except between 1970–1976 where the headline retail price index (RPI) was used. RPIX was used in preference to RPI, since i) the nominal interest rate is *a priori* sensitive to changes in mortgage rates and ii) the real interest rate is compatible with the Government's chosen inflation target measure. Data for RPIX between 1970 and 1976 was not available.

For the second part of the question, refer to Export unit value index for the United Kingdom published in table 2.16 of ONS monthly publication *Economic Trends*. This data is supplied to us from the Department of Trade and Industry. For methodology for the derivation of the export unit value index, refer to *Competitiveness in Manufactures* article on page 43 of June 1997 edition of ONS publication *Economic Trends*. The Department of the Environment can give more detail on international comparisons.

Year	*Nominal rate of interest percentage per annum*	*Real rate of interest percentage per annum*
1970	7.25	1.25
1971	5.50	0.75
1972	6.00	1.00
1973	9.25	1.00
1974	12.25	0.75
1975	10.50	0.50
1976	11.00	0.75
1977	9.50	0.50
1978	9.50	1.00
1979	13.75	1.00
1980	15.50	1.00
1981	14.25	1.25
1982	11.25	1.25
1983	10.00	2.00
1984	10.00	2.25
1985	12.50	2.50
1986	11.00	3.00
1987	9.50	2.50
1988	9.00	2.00
1989	14.50	2.50
1990	14.00	1.75
1991	12.00	1.75
1992	9.25	2.00
1993	5.75	2.00
1994	5.75	2.50
1995	6.50	2.25
1996	6.00	2.00

The nominal rate of interest is an average over the year. The price index used is the rate of change in prices over the year.
All figures were rounded to the nearest 0.25 percentage point.

Dependent Children

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the mean average number of dependent children for each year since 1971 following the form of table 2.6 of "Living in Britain" for the family type whose head of household is *(a)* married, *(b)* cohabiting, *(c)* a lone mother and *(d)* a lone father. [4792]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Edward Leigh, dated 24 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply, as Director of the Office for National Statistics, to your recent question about the average number of dependent children.

The analysis requested is not currently available from published or unpublished tables produced from the General Household Survey (GHS). Table 2.6 in Living in Britain (SO, 1997) is the only breakdown of mean (average) number of dependent children by family type available for each year since 1971. Unpublished information on the average number of dependent children for lone mother families and lone father families is available for the 1994 and 1995 surveys. The figures are:

Families with dependent children: Mean average number of dependent children

Family type	*1994*	*1995*
Married/cohabiting couples	1.9 (2,442)	1.9 (2,358)
Lone mothers	1.7 (660)	1.7 (607)
Lone fathers	1.3 (48)	1.5 (51)
All lone parents	1.7 (708)	1.7 (658)
All families with dependent children	1.8 (3,150)	1.8 (3,016)

Base numbers are in brackets, and correspond to the number of respondents in the survey within each group.

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the age of the youngest dependent child by family type following the form of table 2.9 of "Living in Britain", indicating the percentages of children living in a household headed by a person who is *(a)* married, *(b)* cohabiting, *(c)* a lone mother, *(d)* a lone father and *(e)* a lone parent. [4844]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Edward Leigh, dated 24 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply, as Director of the Office for National Statistics, to your recent question about the age of youngest dependent children.

The analysis requested is not currently available from published or unpublished tables produced from the General Household Survey (GHS). Table 2.9 in Living in Britain 1995 (SO, 1997) is the only breakdown of age of youngest dependent child by family type available. The unit of analysis (ie the base for calculating percentages) is 'all families with dependent children' rather than 'all children'.

The forthcoming Office for National Statistics publication 'Social Focus on Families', to be published by the Stationery Office in August 1997, will include a table (based on 1995 data) showing the age of the youngest dependent child by family type using the categories a) married couples b) cohabiting couples c) all couples d) lone mothers e) lone fathers f) lone parents g) all families with dependent children. As with Table 2.9, the unit of analysis is 'all families with dependent children' rather than 'all children'.

Average Earnings

Ms Kelly: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made *(a)* of the contribution of wage drift to the recent increase in average earnings and *(b)* of the current methods employed by the ONS in its seasonal adjustments. [4577]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Ms Ruth Kelly, dated 24 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on the contributions of wage drift to the recent increase in average earnings and the current methods of seasonal adjustment employed by the ONS.

It is difficult to decompose reliably whole economy average earnings into wage drift and pay settlements because we do not have adequate information on whole economy settlements. Consequently, ONS does not estimate the contribution wage drift makes to increases in average earnings. We monitor the general level of settlements in the economy, which have been relatively stable over the last year or so. This suggests that recent increases in average earnings have been, in part, due to wage drift and particularly larger bonus payments, especially in the financial services sector.

The ONS currently publishes a seasonally adjusted series of average earnings growth and an underlying rate, which attempts to adjust for temporary influences such as arrears of pay and variations in the timing of bonus payments. A recent review of the monthly wages and salaries survey, from which earnings statistics are derived, recommended that ONS should consider moving to X-11 ARIMA seasonal adjustment software for earnings data; this is currently being evaluated. X-11 ARIMA is one ONS's standard method of seasonally adjusting time series.

Unemployment

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to ensure that the true level of unemployment at ward level in Rotherham will be reflected under the proposed new method of measuring employment. [5006]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Dennis MacShane, dated 24 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on the introduction of a monthly version of the Labour Force Survey.

I am responsible for deciding the form, coverage and timing of release of statistics issued by ONS, taking into account the views of customers. ONS consulted on the future presentation of labour market statistics; the consultation exercise was launched through an article in the *Labour Market Trends* published on 8 May. Comments on the proposals should have been sent to ONS by 14 June.

The proposals set out for consultation reflect the House of Commons Employment Select Committee recommendation that more prominence should be given to the measure of unemployment which is based on the internationally agreed ILO definition.

ONS is committed to providing the statistics that users need and will maintain existing outputs wherever possible.

Low Pay

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in the Colchester parliamentary constituency were paid at rates below *(a)* £4, *(b)* £3.50 and *(c)* £3 per hour, at the latest date for which figures are available. [5001]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Bob Russell, dated 24 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on earnings in the Colchester parliamentary constituency.

The latest information, from the New Earrings Survey (NES) April 1996, precedes the creation of Colchester parliamentary constituency. Data for the areas prior to the last General Election are given in the table below.

Employees on adult rates whose pay for the survey pay-period was not affected by absence, NES April 1996

	£3.00	*£3.50*	*£4.00*
North-Colchester			
Full-time	0.8	2.5	8.1
Part-time	7.0	18.6	37.2
All	2.5	6.8	15.8
South Colchester and Maldon			
Full-time	3.9	7.0	13.3
Part-time	14.6	33.3	47.9
All	6.8	14.2	22.7

Spending Review

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list categories of assets which will form part of the proposed Government inventory in the comprehensive spending review; what method of valuation is to be employed; if the national gold reserves will be included; and what method will be employed for their valuation. [4216]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 19 June 1997]:* The Government has not yet finalised which categories of assets to include in the national asset registers or what basis of valuation will be employed. An announcement will be made in due course.

However, information on the amount held in the national gold reserves is already available. It is published monthly in the Bank of England's "Monetary and Financial Statistics" and in the International monetary fund's publication "International Financial Statistics". A conservative basis is adopted for the valuation of the gold reserves: the reserves are revalued at the end of March each year on the basis of 75 per cent. of the average London fixing price for the three months up to the end of March or at 75 per cent. of its final fixing price on the last working day in March whichever gives the lower price.

Privatisation

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the policy of Her Majesty's Government on privatisation. [675]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson *[holding answer 5 June 1997]:* Privatisation will be considered, on its merits, where it is in the public interest to do so.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Amsterdam Treaty

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those articles and Protocols of the provisional treaty of Amsterdam for whose implementation primary legislation will be required; and when he expects to publish the necessary Bill. [5011]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The draft Treaty of Amsterdam is not yet in final form, and needs further technical work before it can be submitted for signature by all Member States. After signature of the Treaty, which is planned for October, primary legislation will be required before the United Kingdom ratifies it. We anticipate that such legislation would need to add to the list of Community Treaties in the European Communities Act 1972 all parts of the new Treaty, including Protocols, except those relating to the intergovernmental pillars. However, it is too soon to say when a Bill might be published or what its precise contents will be.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has for parliamentary scrutiny of the Treaty of Amsterdam.[5094]

Mr. Henderson: A Bill will be required before the UK ratifies the Treaty of Amsterdam. In the meantime we have deposited for parliamentary scrutiny and placed in the libraries of the House a provisional version of the draft Treaty circulated by the Netherlands Presidency. As indicated in the conclusions of the Amsterdam European Council, the necessary final legal editing and harmonisation of the texts must now be completed, with a view to signature of the Treaty in October.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list under the treaty of Amsterdam the *(a)* areas in and *(b)* articles under which a group of member states of the European Union may proceed with any description of common arrangements or legislation, which currently would require unanimous assent; and what representations Her Majesty's Government made in respect of those articles at the conference. [5012]

Mr. Henderson: The conditions and limitations on the scope of flexibility are as set out in general clauses inserted into the Treaty of European Union: Article 5a of the European Community Treaty; and Article K12 of the Treaty on European Union. Article J13a of the Treaty on European Union establishes a constructive abstention mechanism in the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

We made clear in the Intergovernmental Conference that we accepted the need for enhanced flexibility provisions but we believed the scope of such provisions in the Community pillar should be limited, and that any Member State should, in all pillars, where its key national interests were affected, be able to prevent flexible actions taking place. We achieved those objectives.

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which areas currently resolved under unanimity are to be transferred to qualified majority voting under the final Amsterdam treaty text. [4997]

Mr. Henderson: The following areas currently resolved under unanimity are to be transferred to Qualified Majority Voting under the Amsterdam treaty:

Article 45 (3): Compensatory aid for imports of raw materials.

Article 56 (2): Coordination of provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action for special treatment for foreign nationals (right of establishment).

Article 130i (1): Adoption of the research framework programme.

Article 130i (2): Adapting or supplementing the research framework programme.

Article 130o: Setting up of joint undertakings in R&T development.

There will also be QMV for implementing decisions and decisions on the basis of the Common Foreign and Security Policy as provided for by Article J13. However, a Member State may prevent a vote from being taken for important and stated reasons of national interest, whereupon the decision may be referred to the European Council for decision by unanimity.

The flexibility provisions in Articles 5a (Community Pillar) and K12 (Justice and Home Affairs) are also subject to qualified majority voting. However a similar national veto mechanism applies.

The new Articles B (2) (b) (i) and (iii) (some visa questions) in the new chapter on free movement of persons, asylum and immigration shall also be subject to QMV. The UK will not be obliged to take part in co-operation under this chapter.

European Commission (School Packs)

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what criteria determine the material included in school packs sent out by the European Commission Office in London; and in what circumstances external bodies may submit material for distribution via the European Commission Office. [4908]

Mr. Doug Henderson: This is a matter for the European Commission.

European Union (Public Image)

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much money was spent on programmes designed to improve the public image of *(a)* the European Union and *(b)* the Single Currency in 1996; and if he will list the projects involved. [4909]

Mr. Doug Henderson: On the basis that the question is referring to expenditure from the EC budget, a total of 113 million ecu was committed in 1996 for information and communication activities under Title B3-3. Of this, 50 million ecu was spent on Budget line B3-306, which covers a number of specific information programmes, including to publicise the euro.

The EC Budget sets out Commission spending on information activities by broad categories (or Budget lines) within Title B3-3. Details of the individual projects funded from these lines are not published in consolidated form by the Commission.

Montevideo Convention

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the cases at the International Court of Justice to which the United Kingdom has been a party since 1967, to which the Montevideo convention on the Rights and Duties of States applied. [5007]

Mr. Doug Henderson: There have been no such cases.

Former Prisoners of War (Japan)

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which representatives he has met of former prisoners of war of the Japanese; and what discussions he has had with representatives of the Japanese Government in regard to compensation to such former prisoners of war; and if he will make a statement. [5078]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 2 June at column *86* to the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) by the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs invited representatives of the former prisoners of war and civilian internees to a meeting which took place on 3 June.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed the strong feelings held by many in this country about the former prisoners of war with the Japanese Foreign Minister when they met on 21 June. We will continue to maintain close contact with the Japanese Government on this issue.

Indonesia (Arms Exports)

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the export of arms to Indonesia. [4996]

Mr. Doug Henderson: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced on 22 May at column *135* an urgent review of the detailed criteria used in considering licence applications for the export of conventional arms worldwide. Countries will be judged against the new criteria.

Saudi Arabia

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has held with the government of Saudi Arabia concerning human rights; and if he will make a statement. [4765]

Mr. Doug Henderson: My hon. Friend the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs discussed human rights, among other matters, with the Saudi Ambassador on 21 May. We look forward to having a more thorough discussion with the Government of Saudi Arabia at the earliest opportunity on this and a wide range of other issues of interest to us.

Diplomatic Immunity

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many serious offences were committed in the United Kingdom in 1996

by persons entitled to immunity; and how many foreign diplomats or members of their families were withdrawn from their posts in the United Kingdom in the past year as a result of alleged offences. [5551]

Mr. Doug Henderson: From a diplomatic community of over 17,000 persons, thirty four alleged serious offences by persons entitled to immunity were drawn to the attention of this Department in 1996. "Serious Offences" are defined in accordance with the Report to the Foreign Affairs Committee "The Abuse of Diplomatic Immunities and Privileges (1985)" as offences which fall into the category which in certain circumstances attract a maximum penalty of 6 months imprisonment or more: the majority involved drinking and driving and shoplifting.

Six diplomats or members of their families were withdrawn at this Department's request from posts in the United Kingdom as a result of alleged offences, compared with five the previous year.

Cash Limits

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what changes he proposes to make in his Department's cash limits and running cost limits for 1997–98. [5552]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate the following changes will be made.

The cash limit for Class II, Vote 1 (Overseas Representation) will be increased by £225,000 from £619,601,00 to £619,826,000. The increase is required to take in a transfer of £225,000 (Other Current Expenditure) from the Cabinet Office for costs incurred on their behalf.

The gross running costs limit on Class II, Vote 1 will be increased by £3,250,000 from £524,020,000 to £527,270,000.

There is a requirement to provide for new costs and income associated with the Hong Kong Ethnic Minorities Citizens Unit and increased visa costs and income associated with new regimes in Colombia and Ecuador. All increases in provision will be fully offset by extra receipts, and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Malawi

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the projects supported by Britain in Malawi in each of the last five years; and if she will make a statement on aid to Malawi. [5016]

Mr. Foulkes: I am placing in the Library of the House a list of projects supported under the bilateral aid programme to Malawi between 1992–93 and 1996–97. A Country Aid Policy Statement for Malawi was produced in 1995. In 1995 Britain provided to Malawi about £30 million in bilateral aid and £8 million through the European Community. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has recently approved £15 million in programme aid to help Malawi pay teachers' salaries.

Internation Development White Paper

Mr. Cranston: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress is being made with the White Paper on International Development. [5554]

Ms Short: It remains our intention to publish a White Paper on International Development in the Autumn. A process of widespread consultation is underway. I am delighted that there is to be a debate on International Development policies on Tuesday 1 July, during which hon. Members will have an opportunity to feed their thoughts and ideas into the Paper.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Church of England Pensions Board

Mr. Flynn: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will take measures to ensure that the Church of England Pensions Board responds to the letter from the Parish Protection Board, dated 7 November 1996; if he will place a copy of the reply in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [4496]

Mr. Stuart Bell: This is not a matter for the Church Commissioners; it is a matter for the Church of England Pensions Board. I understand, however, that a reply was sent to the Parishes Protection Group on 18 February 1997, after consideration at a meeting of the full Pensions Board (No. 4496 in the Order Paper dated 17 June).

SCOTLAND

Cigarette Smokers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many and what percentage of adult *(a)* men and *(b)* women in Scotland are cigarette smokers in each 10 year age band; and if he will make a statement. [4761]

Mr. Galbraith: The estimated number and percentage of adult men and women cigarette smokers in Scotland in 1994 are provided below.

Age group	*Percentage of cigarette smokers*	*Estimated number of cigarette smokers*
Male smokers		
16–24	31	99,000
25–34	30	125,000
35–44	32	112,000
45–54	31	96,000
55–64	39	99,000
65–74	25	50,000
75+	18	19,000

Age group	Percentage of cigarette smokers	Estimated number of cigarette smokers
Female smokers		
16–24	25	77,000
25–34	36	148,000
35–44	32	113,000
45–54	30	96,000
55–64	30	84,000
65–74	21	54,000
75+	14	30,000

1. The percentage of cigarette smokers has been calculated from the 1994 General Household Survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics.

2. The number of smokers has been estimated using Registrar General for Scotland mid-year population estimates as at 30 June 1994, and the percentage of smokers.

3. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole figure. The estimates of the number of smokers have been rounded to the nearest thousand.

Pensions Agency

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will publish the key performance targets he has set for the Scottish Office Pensions Agency for 1997–98. [5546]

Mr. Dewar: I have set the Scottish Office Pensions Agency the following key performance targets for 1997–98:

To ensure that all awards and transfer payments are accurate to within 0.5 per cent. of their value.

To pay on time 99.5 per cent. of all pensions and lump sums where the target date for receipt of claims is met.

To make transfer payments within 16 working days of members' final instructions to transfer pensions rights.

To ensure that 96 per cent. of contributions due from employers of teachers are received within 15 days of the end of the month to which they relate.

To reduce total identified operating costs per member/beneficiary by 6 per cent.

Prison Service

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what targets he has set for the Scottish Prison Service for 1997–98. [5547]

Mr. Dewar: I have set the Chief Executive of the Scottish Prison Service the following targets:

Performance measures	Key targets
The number of prisoners unlawfully at large.	No A Category prisoners should escape. The number of escapes by B Category prisoners should be no higher than 1.7 per 1,000 prisoners. The number of escapes by C Category prisoners should be no higher than 2 per 1,000 prisoners.
The number of serious assaults on staff and prisoners.	The number of serious assaults on staff should be no higher than 3 per 1,000 staff. The number of serious assaults on other prisoners should be less than the 1996–97 outturn.
Basic quality of life for prisoners	By end March 1998 70 per cent. of prisoners will have access to forms of night sanitation.
The amount of available opportunities for prisoners' self development.	To ensure that 450 prisoners have completed a cognitive skills programme and 70 prisoners have completed a sex offender programme during 1997–98.
Average annual cost per prisoner place.	To keep costs within £28,317 per place available for use.
The level of absence through staff sickness.	To reduce the average number of days lost per person per year through staff sickness to 15.

Capital Receipts

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list for each local authority the actual annual capital receipts for 1996–97, indicating in each case receipts from *(a)* right to buy, *(b)* stock transfer and *(c)* land sales; and if he will indicate for each authority and for each category of receipts the annual targets set out in the estimates at the start of the year. [3308]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 17 June 1997]:* Information on local authority housing capital receipts in 1996–97 is set out in the table. A target of £22 million was set for receipts from stock transfer, but no receipts were achieved.

£ Million

Authority	Right to buy		Land sales		Total receipts[2]	
	Target	Near actual[1]	Target	Near actual[1]	Target	Near actual[1]
Aberdeen City Council	13.050	11.381	0.300	0.164	15.212	12.018
Aberdeenshire Council	7.260	7.005	0.500	0.626	8.533	7.954
Angus Council	3.600	4.508	0.050	0.025	4.070	4.557
Argyll and Bute Council	3.060	3.379	0.260	0.141	3.622	3.543
Clackmannanshire Council	2.706	2.856	0.219	0.102	3.166	2.958
Dumfries and Galloway Council	6.274	7.103	0.400	0.578	7.210	7.691
Dundee City Council	4.500	4.103	0.400	0.044	5.984	4.305
East Ayrshire Council	5.154	7.220	0.125	0.000	6.016	7.234
East Dunbartonshire Council	2.451	2.674	0.000	0.000	2.705	2.695
East Lothian Council	3.730	3.836	0.200	0.030	4.386	3.919
East Renfrewshire Council	1.409	0.922	0.020	0.764	1.609	1.686
City of Edinburgh Council	9.410	9.039	2.000	1.449	12.650	10.531
Falkirk Council	6.206	6.400	1.000	0.813	8.067	7.213
Fife Council	15.066	11.771	1.500	0.351	18.051	12.357

£ Million

Authority	Right to buy		Land sales		Total receipts[2]	
	Target	Near actual[1]	Target	Near actual[1]	Target	Near actual[1]
City of Glasgow Council	15.620	20.489	3.000	2.098	22.666	22.814
Highland Council	8.600	10.388	0.500	0.113	9.908	10.632
Inverclyde Council	3.750	4.031	0.182	0.050	4.438	4.089
Midlothian Council	2.606	3.168	0.100	0.222	3.009	3.426
Moray Council	3.950	4.100	0.231	0.139	4.484	4.291
North Ayrshire Council	4.062	4.332	0.236	0.036	5.009	4.378
North Lanarkshire Council	15.690	19.868	2.000	0.546	19.700	20.548
Orkney Islands Council	0.800	0.809	0.010	0.000	0.849	0.809
Perth and Kinross Council	3.919	4.076	0.100	0.180	4.515	4.326
Renfrewshire Council	4.200	5.529	3.000	0.417	8.091	5.959
Scottish Borders Council	2.900	2.880	0.300	0.013	3.559	3.167
Shetland Council	1.435	1.046	0.005	0.007	1.577	1.074
South Ayrshire Council	5.052	4.750	0.000	0.300	5.468	5.050
South Lanarkshire Council	14.758	16.935	0.100	0.208	16.503	17.225
Stirling Council	3.870	4.020	0.200	0.062	4.459	4.162
West Dunbartonshire Council	3.710	2.629	0.000	0.000	4.296	2.677
West Lothian Council	5.200	6.958	0.482	0.250	6.272	7.245
Western Isles Council	0.665	0.528	0.000	0.000	0.769	0.599
Scotland	184.663	198.733	17.420	9.728	226.853	211.132

[1] Near actual information is based on returns from local authorities.
[2] The total receipts target and near actual figures include, as well as right to buy and land sales, target and near actual receipts for stock transfers, rent to mortgage, tenants' choice and loan repayments.

Schools

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the total value of balances held by state schools in Scotland. [5068]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 23 June 1997]:* The information sought is not held centrally.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Low Pay

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time employees at her Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4.00 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3.00 an hour. [4195]

Mr. Murphy: The information requested from the Northern Ireland Office and Northern Ireland Departments is listed:

Earnings	Full-time	Part-time
Less than £4.00 an hour	522	181
Less than £3.50 an hour	1,765	36
Less than £3.00 an hour	24	2

Nursery Education

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list for each education and library board those schools which have nursery school provision, indicating which are in the *(a)* voluntary, *(b)* maintained and *(c)* controlled sectors, indicating the year in which provision was first available, the sums expended by each board in each of the last 10 years for each school and the proposals for the coming school year. [4066]

Mr. Worthington: The available information is as follows:

Belfast education and library board

Controlled or maintained	Full time equivalent pupil places	Primary school	Expenditure £000s 1991–92	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95
Existing provision						
Controlled	25	Seaview	440	522	542	548
Controlled	25	Wheatfield	387	439	447	477
Controlled	25	Mersey Street	302	382	359	371
Controlled	25	Ballygolan	199	231	261	268
Controlled	25	Blackmountain	210	257	240	238
Controlled	25	Rosetta	387	434	422	438
Controlled	25	Stranmillis	385	442	470	474
Controlled	25	Botanic	274	321	350	338
Controlled	25	Fane Street	326	395	392	429
Controlled	25	Ballysillan	259	290	321	331
Controlled	25	Orangefield	422	536	549	576
Controlled	25	Cliftonville	300	398	372	391

Belfast education and library board

Controlled or maintained	*Full time equivalent pupil places*	*Primary school*	*Expenditure £000s* 1991–92	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95
Controlled	50	Fernhill	361	401	404	418
Controlled	50	Dundela	333	382	385	417
Controlled	50	Grove	367	423	439	449
Controlled	50	Lowwood	398	478	472	503
Controlled	50	Nettlefield	419	500	523	572
Controlled	50	Suffolk	278	288	283	307
Controlled	50	Taughmonagh	357	371	378	383
Controlled	50	Blythefield	337	384	385	412
Controlled	50	Avoneil	414	479	488	518
Controlled	50	Euston Street	387	435	469	511
Controlled	25	Knocknagoney	285	322	353	370
Maintained	50	St. Bride's	723	865	892	963
Maintained	50	St. Malachy's	347	401	410	460
Maintained	50	St. Matthew's	364	428	444	463
Proposed extra provision						
		Nil				

North-eastern education and library board

Controlled or maintained	*Full-time equivalent pupil places*	*Primary school*	*Expenditure £000s* 1991–92	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95
Existing provision						
Controlled	25	Mossgrove	265	301	310	325
Controlled	25	Victoria	466	525	577	610
Controlled	50	Ballykeel	490	521	586	596
Controlled	50	Whitehouse	335	370	399	414
Controlled	50	Oakfield	494	569	585	602
Controlled	50	Rathcoole	398	436	441	457
Maintained	50	St. James'	230	271	316	318
Controlled	50	Clough	132	168	176	189
Controlled	50	Kilmoyle	91	98	96	92
Proposed extra provision			*Earliest start date: 1 September 1997*			
Controlled	25	Bushmills	Approved under the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation			
Controlled	25	Harpurs Hill				

South-eastern education and library board

Controlled or maintained	*Full-time equivalent pupil places*	*Primary school*	*Expenditure £000s* 1991–92	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95
Existing provision						
Controlled	50	Braniel	417	481	476	460
Controlled	50	Belvoir Park	385	457	491	530
Controlled	50	Lisburn Central	359	402	438	480
Controlled	50	Brooklands	638	720	862	793
Maintained	50	St. Mark's	648	715	819	841
Proposed extra provision			*Earliest start date: 1 September 1997*			
Controlled	25	Westwinds (Newtownards)	Approved under the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation			
Controlled	25	Kilcooley (Bangor)				
Controlled	25	Old Warren (Lisburn)				

Southern education and library board

Controlled or maintained	*Full-time equivalent pupil places*	*Primary school*	*Expenditure (£000s) 1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
Existing provision						
Controlled	25	Dickson	290	326	332	331
Controlled	25	Donacloney	196	217	248	287
Controlled	25	Hart Memorial	390	468	488	513
Controlled	25	Bessbrook	143	178	181	189
Controlled	25	Lurgan Model	140	160	183	213
Controlled	25	Craigavon	163	180	176	164
Controlled	25	Hardy Memorial	456	511	541	559
Controlled	50	Carrick Lurgan	323	358	408	419
Controlled	50	King's Park	580	629	671	740
Controlled	50	Ballyoran	379	445	493	560
Controlled	50	Drumgor	516	568	605	601
Controlled	50	Tullygally	340	397	414	411
Maintained	25	St. Malachy's Carrickcroppan/ Camlough	307	345	349	356
Maintained	25	Seagoe	206	237	248	271
Maintained	50	Cloughoge	376	423	504	495
Maintained	50	St. Anthony's	642	746	787	796
Maintained	50	St. Brendan's	597	688	684	697
Maintained	50	St. Joseph's Infants, Lurgan	447	500	451	569
Maintained	50	St. Joseph's Bessbrook	421	481	533	550
Proposed extra provision			*Earliest start date: 1 September 1997*			
Maintained	50	St. Patrick's (Newry)	Approved under the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation			
Maintained	50	St. Patrick's (Dungannon)				

Western education and library board

Controlled or maintained	*Full-time equivalent pupil places*	*Primary school*	*Expenditure £000s 1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
Existing provision						
Controlled	25	Londonderry Model	376	486	467	523
Controlled	25	Sion Mills	320	363	374	458
Controlled	50	Ebrington	650	702	745	728
Controlled	50	Greenhaw	340	375	407	411
Controlled	25	Fountain	Opened 12 June 1995			
Maintained	25	St. Columbkilles	379	404	419	424
Maintained	50	Dungiven Road	486	550	569	562
Maintained	50	Holy Child	500	543	584	584
Proposed extra provision			*Earliest start date: 1 September 1997*			
Maintained	50	Rosemount (Londonderry)	Approved under the Londonderry Regeneration Initiative			
Maintained	50	Barrack Street (Strabane)	Approved under the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation			
Maintained	50	St. Ronan's (Lisnaskea)				
Maintained	25	St. Patrick's (Castlederg)				
Controlled	25	Ashlea PS Londonderry				

1. The year in which the provision became available is not available for all schools and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

2. The information is for nursery units only.

3. Expenditure details are only available from 1991–92 (when formula funding was introduced) to 1994–95. Expenditure statements for 1995–96 and 1996–97 are not yet available. The figures relate to the total expenditure at each school as it is not possible to disaggregate expenditure on a nursery unit from expenditure on the rest of the school.

4. Not all of the new provision will be available in September: it will come onstream over the course of the year. There are likely to be further approvals under these programmes.

Government Training Centres

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which Government training centres have *(a)* achieved and *(b)* not been awarded the job skills quality management status. [4240]

Mr. Worthington: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Training and Employment Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. Ian Walters. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Ian Walters to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 19 June 1997:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me, as Chief Executive of the Training and Employment Agency, to reply to your question about the number of Training Centres which have reached the standards required under the Jobskills Quality Management System (JQMS).

There are ten Training Centres in Northern Ireland and to date three, Dundonald, Lisburn and Omagh, have been awarded JQMS. The remaining Centres at Ballymena, Craigavon, Enniskillen, Felden, Maydown, Newry and Springtown are on line to achieve JQMS before 31 December 1997 in line with a staged implementation of this new standard.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Southern Area Health Board Headquarters

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what proposals there are for the future use of the former headquarters of the Southern Area Health Board at Carn, Craigavon; and if she will make a statement. [4241]

Mr. Worthington: The former Southern Health and Social Services Board Headquarters at 20 Seagoe Industrial Estate, Portadown was vacated and became surplus to requirements at the end of 1996. In accordance with Government procedures for the disposal of surplus land and property, the site and the portable buildings were advertised for sale on the open market in January 1997. A sale was agreed and the legal formalities were concluded on 21 March 1997.

Health Centres

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the names of health centres *(a)* owned by the Southern Area Health Board, *(b)* for which the Southern Area Health Board contributes a loan towards capital expenditure and *(c)* for which the Southern Area Health Board contributed a grant towards capital expenditure. [4245]

Mr. Worthington: Health Centres are either in the ownership of the Department of Health and Social Services or the relevant Health and Social Services Trust. Details are provided in the table. The Southern Health and Social Services Board does not contribute loans or grants towards the capital expenditure of any health centre. At present a board may only provide financial support in relation to Health Centre premises which have been sold to general medical practitioners.

Table: Health centres in the Southern board area

Location	*Ownership*
Portadown	DHSS
Warrenpoint	DHSS

Table: Health centres in the Southern board area

Location	*Ownership*
Crossmaglen	DHSS
Rathfriland	DHSS
Armagh	DHSS
Richill	DHSS
Markethill	DHSS
Ballygawley	DHSS
Lurgan	Craigavon/Banbridge Community Trust
Banbridge	Craigavon/Banbridge Community Trust
Brownlow	Craigavon/Banbridge Community Trust
Gilford	Craigavon/Banbridge Community Trust
Newry	Newry and Mourne Trust
Kilkeel	Newry and Mourne Trust
Newtownhamilton	Newry and Mourne Trust.

Arts Policy

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she plans to review policy on the arts; and if she will make a statement. [4418]

Mr. Worthington: I have no plans at present for a review of arts policy in Northern Ireland. However, in conjunction with the Arts Council, I wish to promote the widest possible access to the arts, particularly for young people, and to increase the impact of the cultural sector on the economy.

Council for Voluntary Action

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to meet representatives of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action; and if she will make a statement. [4419]

Marjorie Mowlam: I met representatives of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action on Friday 20 June when I opened their annual conference in Belfast.

Targeting Social Need Policy

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to review the Targeting Social Need policy; and if she will make a statement. [4422]

Mr. Worthington: It is anticipated that recommendations on Targeting Social Need will be included in the forthcoming report by the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights on employment equality in Northern Ireland. The Government will give the fullest consideration to the Commission's recommendations, including its implications for the Targeting Social Need initiative.

Unemployment

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she plans to issue a statement concerning the consultation on long-term unemployment; and if she will make a statement. [4423]

Mr. Worthington: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Training and Employment Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. Ian Walters. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter form Ian Walters to Dr. Norman Godman, dated 24 June 1997:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me as Chief Executive of the Training and Employment Agency, to reply to your question about the current consultation on long-term unemployment in Northern Ireland.

The initial stage of the consultation process has been completed with the publication of a consultative document and a series of public seminars across Northern Ireland. Those attending the seminars had the chance to discuss long-term unemployment with Agency officials and indeed with each other. In addition, we have received over 80 written submissions on the document and are currently in the process of reviewing each of them.

As we continue the review we will take full account of the Government's Welfare to Work proposals and the priority attached to them.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Courts (Essex)

Mr. Burns: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the future of the county court in Chelmsford. [4897]

Mr. Hoon: The question concerns a matter which has been assigned to the Court Service under the terms of its framework document. I have therefore asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from M. D. Huebner to Mr. Simon Burns, dated 24 June 1997:

The Parliamentary Secretary of the Lord Chancellor's Department has asked me to reply to your Question about the future of Chelmsford County Court.

I can confirm that there are no plans to move or close Chelmsford County Court.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on plans to reorganise the *(a)* county courts and *(b)* magistrates' courts in Essex, with special reference to the Chelmsford area. [4894]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor is currently considering a proposal to close the Braintree and Bishop Stortford County Courts. If these courts are closed, some work previously dealt with at the Braintree court might be dealt with in Chelmsford.

Responsibility for the civil and higher criminal courts network falls to the Court Service which must constantly monitor and review the viability of its resources in the light of changing business needs and workload trends. Decisions on any proposals for change will be made by the Lord Chancellor taking account of all the relevant factors.

Turning to the question of magistrates' courts in Essex, there are no current plans for closures in the area. Essex Magistrates' Courts Committee has, however, issued a consultation paper setting out a number of options for the reorganisation of petty sessional divisions in the County. The consultation period closes on 30 June. One of these options is that the current Chelmsford and Maldon and Witham PSDs should be amalgamated, together with some or all of the Braintree and Halstead and Brentwood PSDs, into a single PSD.

The MCC has indicated that this new PSD could be served by one courthouse to be centred at Chelmsford or possibly at Witham.

Decisions concerning the future and number of magistrates' courts in their area are for the relevant MCC to determine. A local authority that contributes financially may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997. In the absence of an appeal, however, the Lord Chancellor plays no part in the process.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals he has to move the *(a)* county court and *(b)* magistrates' court from Chelmsford to elsewhere in Essex, indicating the place; and if he will make a statement. [4895]

Mr. Hoon: I have no proposals to move either the county court or the magistrates' court from Chelmsford.

Responsibility for the civil and higher criminal courts network falls to the Court Service which must constantly monitor and review the viability of its resources in the light of changing business needs and workload trends. Decisions on any proposals for change will be made by the Lord Chancellor taking account of all the relevant factors.

Decisions concerning the future and number of magistrates' courts in its area are for the relevant MCC to determine. A local authority that contributes financially may appeal to the lord chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997. In the absence of an appeal, however, the Lord Chancellor plays no part in the process.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the future of the magistrates' court in Chelmsford. [4896]

Mr. Hoon: I have no proposals to move either the county court or the magistrates' court from Chelmsford. Decisions concerning the future and number of magistrates' court in its area are for the relevant MCC to determine. A local authority that contributes financially may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997. In the absence of an appeal, however, the Lord Chancellor plays no part in the process.

Running Costs

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make changes to the running costs limit for Class VIII Vote 1 for 1997–98. [5473]

Mr. Hoon: The running costs limit for Class VIII Vote 1 has been reduced by £73,000 from £427,754,000 to £427,681,000 to reflect a transfer to the Cabinet Office for editorial support for the hard copy publications functions of the Statutory Publications Office.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Town Centre Management Schemes

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to encourage town centre management schemes. [4010]

Mr. Raynsford: PPG 6 (Town Centres and Retail Developments) actively encourages local authorities to prepare town centre management initiatives. To help facilitate this the Government provide core funding for the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM), which has a lead role in the promotion of town centre management. The Government have also provided financial support for the ATCM research reports on "Town Improvement Zones" (undertaken by KPMG), "Managing urban open spaces", undertaken by Chesterton's, and "Town Centre Partnerships: a survey of good practice", undertaken by Hillier Parker and URBED.

Unfit Homes (Portsmouth)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he proposes to publish targets for the reduction in the number of unfit homes in Portsmouth; [4294]

(2) what representations he has received from Portsmouth City Council concerning the number of unfit homes in Portsmouth; [4295]

(3) how many unfit homes there are in Portsmouth; and what plans he has to reduce their number. [4293]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department has received no representations from Portsmouth city council concerning the number of unfit homes in Portsmouth. Local authorities in England are asked to provide estimates of dwellings in their area which are unfit on the annual housing investment programme returns. Portsmouth's latest HIP return reported that, on 1 April 1996, 340 of its own dwellings and 5,300 private sector dwellings were unfit. Figures for other public sector bodies and housing associations were not provided. Local authorities are responsible for taking action to tackle unfit homes within their area, including the setting and publishing of any targets for reduction, within the context of their housing strategy and investment programmes.

Environmental Taskforce

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what consultation he will undertake on his proposals for an environmental taskforce; and if he will consult with non-Governmental environmental organisations. [4480]

Angela Eagle: The Government are committed to delivering the New Deal programme in partnership with other organisations in the voluntary, private and public sectors, including non-governmental environmental organisations, and will consult those organisations shortly.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the time scale for the creation of regional development agencies. [4789]

Angela Eagle: We propose to bring forward legislation in the autumn with a view to the agencies beginning operation on 1 April 1999.

Sex Offenders

Ms Hewitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will issue guidelines to local authorities on how they should handle applications for local authority tenancies from individuals who have been convicted of sex offences against children; [4815]

(2) if he will review the responsibilities and powers of local authorities where an individual who has been convicted of sex offences against children *(a)* moves into the authority's area and *(b)* applies for a local authority tenancy; and if he will make a statement. [4814]

Mr. Raynsford: We recognise that this is a matter of great concern. It is being actively considered by my Department in close co-operation with other relevant Government Departments and the representatives of local authorities and housing professionals. Local housing authorities already have the power to decide which classes of person qualify or do not qualify to be included in their housing registers and whether to allocate tenancies to such persons. The Home Office is consulting other Government Departments, the police and other practitioners about guidance to be issued to the police on the management of the information acquired under the Sex Offenders Act 1997. The guidance will cover the disclosure of information to third parties. The representatives of local authorities and the housing profession are considering whether to issue separate advice on this matter to local authorities and will discuss this with my Department.

Housing Estates (Pavements)

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to lay down guidelines to ensure that housing estates are not built without pavements. [4611]

Mr. Raynsford: General guidance relating to the design of residential roads and footpaths is set out in my Department's "Design Bulletin 32", issued in revised form in 1992. This advises that, when designing the layouts for new housing development, appropriate provision should be made for pedestrians. It will be a matter for local judgment about how this might best be achieved, taking account of local circumstances. The bulletin recognises that in some cases surfaces shared by pedestrians, cyclists and motorists may be appropriate provided they allow for safe use by all users.

Environment Agency

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the estimated total staffing level for the Environment Agency in 1996; what are his estimates for *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and

(c) 1999; and what additional responsibilities the Environment Agency will be taking on during this period. [4729]

Angela Eagle: The staffing level of the Environment Agency is a matter for the Agency. The Agency's 1997–98 Corporate Plan shows the following total staffing figures: 1996–97 budget 9,450; 1997–98 plan 9,300; 1998–99 plan 9,100; and 1999–2000 plan 8,950. The 1998–99 Corporate Plan is in the course of preparation. The Government would discuss any changes in responsibilities with the Agency and would expect to announce any major additions.

Composting Sites

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the results of research commissioned by the Environment Agency on bio-aerosol production of commercial composting sites will be available. [4598]

Angela Eagle: The results of the research on bio-aerosol production at commercial composting sites, originally commissioned by the Department and now managed by the Environment Agency, are expected to be available early in the autumn.

Solar Homes

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide incentives to local authorities to examine the buildings of solar homes. [4597]

Angela Eagle: Local planning authorities are required by "Planning Policy Guidance Note 22" to have regard to renewable energy—including solar energy. Detailed technical guidance is freely available from the DTI and my own Department on how to make the most of this energy source.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide Government funding for solar homes. [4600]

Angela Eagle: In line with its manifesto commitment to undertake a new and strong drive to develop renewable energy sources, including solar energy, the Government have announced a review of policy in this area. The review includes considerations of what would be necessary and practicable to achieve 10 per cent. of UK's electricity needs from renewables by the year 2010 and how renewables can make an effective contribution to meeting requirements for future greenhouse gas reduction commitments. In the meantime, the Government's new and renewable energy programme, currently under way, will continue.

Oil Extraction (Atlantic Ocean)

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what procedures are in place to ensure that proposals for future oil extraction in the Atlantic are compatible with the requirements of the European Habitats directive. [4727]

Angela Eagle: The DTI carries out a full consultation with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee before offering any licences for oil extraction. Indeed, as a result of advice received from JNCC on the 17th licensing round that the Flannan Isles could be affected by certain blocks of licences, DTI withdrew those blocks from the round. Offers of licences are usually conditional upon the acceptance of special conditions to protect environmental sensitivities and the interests of users of the sea. This process is analogous to the requirements of article 6(2) and 6(3) of the Habitats Directive.

Zoo Licensing Act 1981

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to review the Zoo Licensing Act 1981; and what arrangements he will make for consultation on that review. [4606]

Angela Eagle: We are currently considering how best to take forward our commitment to aim for the highest standards of care for animals in zoos. We shall be looking shortly at the operation of the Zoo Licensing Act and considering what changes may be required. As part of this process, we will consult the relevant organisations representing zoo operators, veterinary and animal welfare interests.

Compulsory Competitive Tendering

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list examples of best value arrangements that he is using as models to replace CCT. [4884]

Mr. Raynsford: Although a number of local authorities and others have put forward their ideas, we do not have preconceived models of best value arrangements. We intend to work with local government and other interested parties over the coming months to develop a practicable and effective best value framework which will apply the principles which we announced on 2 June. Pilot projects, which will include a variety of approaches, will play an important part in this. We will shortly be inviting local authorities to bid to undertake pilot work.

Footpaths and Bridleways

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what initiatives he proposes to assist local authorities to maintain public footpaths and bridleways. [4999]

Angela Eagle: We attach great importance to the maintenance of footpaths and bridleways. We propose to look closely at the adequacy of existing measures to see whether further initiatives are needed.

Highway authorities already have a statutory duty to maintain most footpaths, bridleways and byways. The Countryside Commission is assisting them through the Parish Paths Partnership scheme, which gives grants and advice to parishes to encourage them to participate in the better management of footpaths and bridleways in their areas. The Commission also provides authorities with grants of up to 75 per cent. of the maintenance costs of footpaths of bridleways which form part of National Trails.

Energy Efficiency

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he plans to take to ensure that the majority of energy efficiency works are carried out in those homes which are most in need of improvement. [5151]

Angela Eagle: Local authorities have to draw up strategies for improving the energy efficiency of all the residential accommodation in their areas under the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995. In assessing them my right hon. Friend will expect an approach which targets those properties where the need is greatest, and he will, where necessary, require authorities to modify their strategies. Energy efficiency will also be a factor taken into account when assessing authorities as part of the housing investment programme.

Leghold Traps

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what is his policy on the use of leghold traps *(a)* on land and *(b)* in water; [4527]

(2) what representations he has received concerning the United Kingdom's position on leghold traps and fur imports; and if he will make a statement. [4528]

Angela Eagle: Leghold traps have been banned in the United Kingdom for more than 40 years. The Government fully support efforts to improve the welfare of trapped animals in general and believes that the phasing out of leghold traps is an essential element of this.

The Government received representations from the European Commission and the Government of Canada on the United Kingdom's position on the Commission's proposed "framework agreement on humane trapping standards". Representations were also received from a number of animal welfare bodies—including the RSPCA and the International Fund for Animal Welfare—and from the British Fur Trade Association. We received more than 20,000 letters and postcards from the public urging the Government to reject the agreement.

The Government made clear its intention before the Environment Council meeting that we would vote against the agreement since we believed that it did not go far enough in banning the use of leghold traps. Several other member states shared our reservations but no decision was taken on the Commission's proposal at the meeting.

Council Tax (Carer's Discount)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate his Department has made of the proportion of eligible people who are currently claiming the carer's discount for council tax bills. [4297]

Mr. Raynsford: The Department has not made such an estimate. Local authorities are under a duty to ensure that discounts are granted to the right households.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps his Department has taken to ensure that eligible people on *(a)* disability living allowance and *(b)* the higher rate of attendance allowance are aware of their entitlement to (i) the carer's discount for council tax bills and (ii) the facility to backdate claims to April 1993. [4307]

Mr. Raynsford: The council tax regulations require local authorities to include with council tax bills information on the circumstances when a bill may be subject to discount. Local authorities are also under a duty to make sure that discounts are being granted to the right households. If somebody is entitled to a discount but has not received one, local authorities must backdate the discount to the date when entitlement first arose. The Department has also produced a leaflet "Council Tax: A Guide to your Bill" which explains the council tax and the circumstances when a carer may be disregarded for the purposes of a discount. The leaflet is made available to the general public and has been distributed to local authorities and voluntary organisations.

Police Wildlife Liaison Officers

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many wildlife liaison officers are currently in post for each police force. [4623]

Angela Eagle: A definitive list of Police Wildlife Liaison Officers (PWLOs) is not held centrally, but I understand that most forces have at least one full or part-time PWLO, and that the total number of officers who deal with wildlife enquiries is about 350. These officers mainly carry out their wildlife responsibilities voluntarily and in addition to their day-to-day police duties.

The allocation of responsibilities within forces is for each chief constable to decide, having regard to all their policing obligations, including the investigation of wildlife offences.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what training, guidance and expert advice is made available to police wildlife liaison officers. [4625]

Angela Eagle: Training and guidance is provided within forces, and is also available from Government Departments and agencies and non-Government sources.

The annual Police Wildlife Liaison Officer' conference provides an important opportunity for training. Speakers cover a wide range of issues and subject areas and Police officers have an unparalleled opportunity to share experience and expertise.

The Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime supports the network of Police Wildlife Liaison Officers. It published a handbook "Wildlife Crime: A Guide to Wildlife Law Enforcement in the UK" at the end of last year, and will publish guidance on the use of DNA evidence in wildlife investigations shortly.

Work on identifying training needs is being carried out by the Partnership, and many of its members, including my Department, contribute actively to investigations by providing advice and expertise. Separate work is also underway in the Police Service, under the direction of the Wildlife Advisor to the Association of Chief Police Officers.

Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (Police)

Mr. Hincliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to review the policing aspects of the operation of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. [4626]

Angela Eagle: The Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime submitted recommendations for changes to the enforcement provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 earlier this year. Eleven recommendations were made including giving the courts the option of imprisoning wildlife criminals, and facilitating the use of DNA evidence in wildlife investigations.

The recommendations were circulated for consultation in March 1997. The Department is considering the comments received and the Government's response will be published shortly.

Housing, London

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made for each London borough of *(a)* the current year's capital expenditure, *(b)* the capital requirement for urgent repair and refurbishment and *(c)* capital spending required on new building to house all homeless people for which the authority is responsible. [4411]

Mr Raynsford *[holding answer 23 June 1997]:* Local authorities are allocated resources for capital investment in housing under the housing investment programme (HIP). A table showing allocations to London boroughs for 1997–98 is as follows. In addition local authorities received resources for capital expenditure on housing via the single regeneration budget and the capital challenge pilot and can also use their own resources, such as useable capital receipts.

As part of the HIP round local authorities are asked to submit expenditure plans and information on need for capital works. The relevant HIP forms for each authority for 1997–98 are available in the Library.

The Government are committed to increased investment through the capital receipts initiative, and has recently issued a consultation paper to all local authorities. Under this initiative local authorities will be expected to consider appropriate schemes to meet needs including the repair and refurbishment of existing stock and the provision of new homes to meet the needs of homeless households.

1997–98 Housing investment programme allocations

London	*Total housing investment allocations (£ thousand)*
Barking and Dagenham	4,975
Barnet	4,790
Bexley	2,639
Brent	10,932
Bromley	2,614
Camden	10,270
City of London	343
Croydon	8,477
Ealing	7,799
Enfield	5,895
Greenwich	10,491
Hackney	13,884
Hammersmith and Fulham	9,376
Haringey	10,405
Harrow	2,598
Havering	2,384
Hillingdon	5,999
Hounslow	5,134
Islington	9,996
Kensington and Chelsea	6,358
Kingston upon Thames	2,396
Lambeth	13,648
Lewisham	11,327
Merton	3,310
Newham	16,394
Redbridge	4,258
Richmond upon Thames	2,911
Southwark	13,661
Sutton	2,944
Tower Hamlets	9,777
Waltham Forest	6,432
Wandsworth	10,147
Westminster	10,274
London	242,837

OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions by which procedures the House will be able to scrutinise the OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment. [3972]

Mrs. Roche: I have been asked to reply.

My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade has primary responsibility for the OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). Two Explanatory Memoranda on the MAI have already been put before Select Committees by this Department—dated 31 March 1995 and 6 March 1997—copies of which are available in the Library. My Department will continue to follow the scrutiny procedures for international treaties that the UK and the EC are negotiating.

Nuclear Waste

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the dates, routes and nature of aircraft flights transporting nuclear waste which have taken place in United Kingdom air space to date. [4802]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

Since January 1990 there have been six flights carrying small amounts of nuclear waste into the United Kingdom. Five of these shipments were in 1993 and the other was in 1994, and involved UK waste arising from fabrication of fuel pins as part of the European Fast Reactor programme. The pins were fabricated in France and the associated waste was returned to the UK on these flights. Since 1994 there have been no flights involving the transport of nuclear waste in the UK. All shipments of nuclear material comply fully with national and international regulations with regard to safety and security and are in accordance with IAEA recommendations.

Information on any such flights prior to 1990 is not easily available and would incur disproportionate costs.

Road Accidents

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures his Department plans to take to reduce the number of road accidents; and if he will make a statement. [4532]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department is committed to giving road safety a high priority and is currently reviewing its road safety strategy. We shall be announcing new measures from time to time. Road and other transport safety issues will be among the important subjects covered in our fundamental policy review leading to a White Paper on an integrated transport policy.

Cones Hotline

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 9 June, *Official Report*, column *315*, if he will provide a breakdown of the cost of the Cones Hotline between April to September 1995. [4847]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The cost of operating the Cones Hotline in the period April to September 1995 is estimated at £20,000, broken down as follows:

	£
Call-handling company's set-up costs	7,000
Call-handling company's operating costs	8,000
Highways Agency staff costs	5,000
Total	20,000

The figure for Highways Agency staff costs covers the transition from a contracted-out service to the in-house Highways Agency information line which began operation in September 1995.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place a copy of the Cones Hotline telephone log in the Library. [4848]

Ms Jackson: The records of calls to the Cones Hotline contain the names of callers and, in most cases, their addresses and telephone numbers. Personal information given in confidence is exempt from the commitment to provide information in the Code of Practice on Access to Government information.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 9 June, *Official Report*, column *315*, how many calls to the Cones Hotline resulted in action by the Department or others to *(a)* alter the layout of road traffic cones, *(b)* improve signposting at roadworks, *(c)* review diversion routes, *(d)* re-paint road markings and *(e)* investigate road lighting at roadworks. [4806]

Ms Jackson: The records are not sufficiently detailed to give an accurate answer to this question.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 9 June, *Official Report*, column *315*, *(a)* how many and *(b)* what percentage of telephone calls made to the Cones Hotline between June 1992 and September 1995 were specifically about traffic cones. [4849]

Ms Jackson: This information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. In its first year of operation (September 1995 to August 1996) the Highways Agency information line, which replaced the Cones Hotline, received 319 calls specifically about road traffic cones about 4 per cent. of all calls.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 9 June, *Official Report*, column *315*, how many staff were employed *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time to run the Cones Hotline between March 1994 and September 1995. [4860]

Ms Jackson: From March 1994 to March 1995 one member of staff worked full-time on the Cones Hotline during normal office hours. Weekend and out of hours cover was provided by the Department of Transport's duty officer. From April 1995 to September 1995 the Cones Hotline was staffed by an external contractor. From July to September 1995 transitional arrangements were managed by three staff in the Highways Agency.

Variable Speed Limiters

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will estimate the *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of vehicles licensed in the United Kingdom currently equipped with variable speed limiters; and if he will make a statement; [4529]

(2) if he will list the *(a)* dates, *(b)* locations, *(c)* duration and *(d)* results of trials undertaken by his Department into the use of variable speed limiters in vehicles; and if he will make a statement; [4530]

(3) what assessment his Department has made of the relationship between variable speed limiters and the total number of *(a)* road accidents and *(b)* fatalities recorded; and if he will make a statement. [4531]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Several different makes of vehicle speed limiter are available. All are designed to limit a vehicle's maximum speed and are required by law to be fitted to large goods vehicles and coaches. Some makers of speed limiter allow the driver to set a lower limit than the maximum but it is not possible to give an estimate of the number or percentage of vehicles fitted with speed limiters which have this additional feature.

Research has been commissioned by my Department to examine the feasibility of equipping vehicles with speed limiters which may be controlled by devices outside the vehicle, for example, by roadside transponders. It is too early to draw any conclusions from this work. In addition, we are monitoring trails taking place in other countries but at present no specific plans exist to trial externally controlled variable speed limiting equipment on public roads in the UK.

We have made no assessment of the relationship between existing variable speed limiters and numbers of road accidents in the UK.

Cycling (London)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the total expenditure in the current year by each London borough on cycling measures; and what proportion of this is borne by central Government. [4762]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Central Government are providing £4 million to London authorities in the current financial year, to support their expenditure on the development of the London cycle network and the Thames cycle route. The following table of figures, copies of which are being placed in the Library of the House, gives the breakdown of this sum by authority. The London authorities are able to incur additional expenditure on such measures by drawing on their own resources, but they are not required to declare to what extent, if any, they will be doing so.

Cycle measures in London financial support from central government (1997–98)

Authority	*£000s*
Barking and Dagenham	83
Barnet	95
Bexley	88
Brent	146
Bromley	73
Camden	93
City of London	66
Croydon	75
Ealing	125
Enfield	116
Greenwich	91
Hackney	77
Hammersmith and Fulham	80
Haringey	106
Harrow	126
Havering	81
Hillingdon	140
Hounslow	175
Islington	85
Kensington and Chelsea	90
Kingston Upon Thames	106
Lambeth	73
Lewisham	82
Merton	95
Newham	91
Redbridge	81
Richmond	77
Southwark	73
Sutton	102
Tower Hamlets	99
Waltham Forest	101
Wandsworth	85
Westminster	71
Sub total	3,148
Thames Cycle Route	752
Contingency held by Lead Borough	100
Total	4,000

A27 Polegate Bypass

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his policy in respect of the construction of the A27 Polegate bypass; and if he will make a statement. [5196]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport announced last week that he would be taking forward our manifesto commitment to carry out a strategic review of the roads programme. The A27 Polegate bypass scheme is part of the Weald and Downland design, build, finance and operate (DBFO) project which is one of 12 cases in which there are urgent decisions pending. These will be considered in an accelerated review. Decisions will be announced in July.

Air Services (London)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to *(a)* maintain and *(b)* improve access by air to London from regional United Kingdom airports. [4400]

Ms Glenda Jackson: A wide range of services connect regional airports to London in a flourishing market. Ministers are considering what options might be available and appropriate to support and develop regional services.

Cycling

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what additional financial support is available to assist local authorities to encourage cycling within local integrated transport strategies. [5384]

Dr. Gavin Strang: It is Government policy to encourage cycling. The sum of £79 million has been allocated to local authorities in 1997–98 for their integrated transport packages. Virtually all the packages include measures to promote cycling. The Department will continue to support these initiatives in future, as far as resources allow. It is not possible at this stage to predict the levels of funding that will be available in 1998–99 and later years.

Integrated Transport Policy

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the White Paper on the long-term strategy for an integrated transport policy to be published; and if he will make a statement. [5162]

Dr. Strang: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given on 5 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *226*.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the *(a)* desirability and *(b)* feasibility of internalising social and environmental externalities within each transport mode. [4882]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government welcome the principle of internalising the external costs of transport which encourages more environmentally friendly, fairer and more efficient use of transport. However, the Government also recognise the uncertainties and difficulties of implementation, and supports the need for further study and debate on the issues raised. For example, the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions is at the forefront of research trying to place monetary values on the environmental impact of transport and other activities.

Warsaw Convention Compensation

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which airlines flying into and out of the United Kingdom have *(a)* fully waived, *(b)* partially waived and *(c)* not waived their right under the Warsaw convention to limit compensation payable in respect of passengers injured or killed whilst travelling with them. [5122]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have placed a copy of the information required in the Library.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Warsaw convention limits on compensation for death or personal injury. [5121]

Ms Jackson: The United Kingdom has long recognised that the limit of liability for death or personal injury to passengers contained in the 1929 Warsaw convention was inadequate, and has adopted for the purposes of national law the higher limits set out in the Hague and Montreal protocols. Consequently, airlines registered in the UK are currently required to accept a liability limit of not less than 100,000 special drawing rights—approximately £85,000.

Earlier this year the UK supported the European Commission's proposals for a regulation on air carrier liability in case of accidents. This will require airlines to accept strict liability for passenger death or injury up to the ECU equivalent of 100,000 SDRs, with a fault-based regime for higher claims, subject to no upper limit. The new regulation, which also places obligations on both EU and non-EU carriers to make more prominent disclosure of their liability arrangements, is expected to come into force during 1998.

An United Nations specialised agency, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), which has responsibility for these matters, is currently preparing a new convention which will replace the 1929 Warsaw convention and introduce much more realistic limits of liability which will not be restricted to passenger death or injury. The UK participated fully in the recent meeting of the Legal Committee and a diplomatic conference is expected to take place next year during which ICAO members will vote to adopt the new convention.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Birmingham Northern Relief Road is subject to a penalty clause if the scheme is not approved. [4982]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The risk of the public inquiry outcome rests with the concessionaire.

Dr. Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he intends to review the proposed Birmingham Northern Relief Road in the context of the Government's integrated approach to transport environmental planning; [4983]

(2) if the Birmingham Northern Relief Road will be included in the moratorium on road building. [4994]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We announced a comprehensive roads review on 19 June. The Birmingham Northern Relief Road is one of the 12 cases that will be the subject of an accelerated review.

Traffic Control

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment his Department has made of the impact on traffic control of *(a)* mini roundabouts and *(b)* road humps; and if he will make a statement. [5080]

Ms Jackson: The Transport Research Laboratory has recently completed for the Department a major study of the safety aspects of mini roundabouts in relation to traffic flow. The results will be published later this year.

The Department has a programme of research into the effect of road humps and other traffic calming measures on traffic. Road humps have been found to be effective in reducing vehicle speeds and hence accidents in residential areas. The results of this research are published in the form of research reports and traffic advisory leaflets. A selection of leaflets relevant to road humps have been placed in the library.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Mr. McCall

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will set aside the decision of the disability appeal tribunal held at Chester on 22 April concerning Mr. McCall of Broughton, near Chester, and if she will make a statement. [1115]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Neither I, nor any other Minister, has the power to intervene in the decision of independent adjudicating authorities. However, it is open to an appellant who is dissatisfied with the decision of a Disability Appeal Tribunal either to apply to have that decision set aside or to seek leave to appeal against it on a point of law to a Social Security Commissioner. Statutory provisions, including time limits, apply to either course.

Absent Parents

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the maximum percentage of net income that an absent parent may be liable to pay; and if she will make a statement. [4628]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Child support assessments made under the maintenance formula are generally restricted to 30 per cent. of an absent parent's net income. Most absent parents pay significantly lower amounts, although higher percentages can apply, for example where an interim maintenance assessment has been imposed in an effort to secure the absent parent's co-operation or the absent parent is in arrears with his payments.

We will be looking closely at all aspects of child support policy over the forthcoming months.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the total number of people removed from benefit as a result of a jobseeker's allowance interview for each month since its inception. [4766]

Mr. Keith Bradley: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) on 18 June, *Official Report*, columns *213–14* .

Domestic Fuel (VAT)

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the effect on *(a)* the average family on benefit, *(b)* a single pensioner and *(c)* a pensioner couple of the introduction of VAT on fuel at 8 per cent., taking into account (i) VAT fuel subsidy added to their benefits and (ii) the impact on the annual uprating of benefits of the inflationary effect of increasing domestic fuel prices by 8 per cent. [5200]

Mr. Keith Bradley: As part of our commitment to reducing poverty we will cut VAT on fuel from 8 to 5 per cent. the lowest possible level.

The net effect of the introduction of VAT on fuel at 8 per cent. is given in the following table:

Family type	*Net effect of VAT on fuel at 8 per cent. (1997–98 prices and benefit levels)*
Average family on income support (assumed to be a couple with two children aged under 11)	15p per week worse off
Single retirement pensioner	No net effect
Couple retirement pensioner	5p per week better off

1. Expenditure estimates based on the 1994–95 Family Expenditure Survey, uprated to 1997–98 levels using the fuel and light component of the Retail Prices Index.

2. Effect of VAT on domestic fuel and power on the uprating indices estimated using the 1997 weight of the fuel and light component of the Retail Prices Index.

Fraud

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when she will commence provisions of the Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997; and if she will make a statement. [5452]

Mr. Denham: The Government aims to rebuild confidence in a Social Security system which will support work, savings and honesty. We are developing a range of measures in order to prevent fraud from occurring in the Social Security system. We will take effective action against fraudsters.

Fraud within a system designed to help those in need is anti-social behaviour which has no place in a society where the right to benefit goes hand in hand with responsible citizenship.

We have today made a commencement order for Sections 1 to 4, 5 to 10, 12, 13, 14, 17 and 18 and most of the Schedules 1 and 2 of the Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997, to come into effect on Tuesday 1 July.

This is an important step towards achieving a secure and fair system. These measures will strengthen action against Housing Benefit fraud, particularly fraud by landlords, which for too long has been allowed to go unchecked.

WALES

Class Sizes

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many classes of five, six and seven-year-olds in each local education authority had more than 30 children on 1 January 1997 based on returns from the All Schools Census; and what this is as a percentage of the total number of classes of five, six, and seven-year-olds in each case. [3166]

Mr. Hain: The information requested is not collected centrally. The Schools' Census in Wales collects information on the number of classes by size of class but does not distinguish classes by age of pupils.

Nursery Education

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) if he will make a statement about the future of nursery provision in the Ponthir area of Torfaen; [3570]

(2) if he will make a statement about the future of nursery provision in Monmouthshire. [3569]

Mr. Hain: The provision of nursery education is at the discretion of local education authorities. Our aim is to ensure a free, at least part-time, place for every four-year-old whose parents want one, with targets for extending provision to three-year-olds. We shall be consulting shortly with the local authority sector and interested organisations about arrangements for early years education from April 1998.

I understand that nursery age children from Ponthir are currently receiving education in the Newport county borough council area under an arrangement with Torfaen county borough council. Torfaen will be reviewing the position for the 1997–98 school year.

Ponthir Primary School

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what applications she has received relating to Ponthir Primary School, Torfaen, under the Popular Schools Initiative. [3576]

Mr. Hain: The Department has received no applications.

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received about overcrowding at Ponthir Primary School. [3577]

Mr. Hain: The Department has received three representations. The responsibility for the matter rests with Torfaen county borough council.

Monnow Bridge

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the need for an additional bridge over the Monnow River in Monmouth. [3572]

Mr. Hain: The main access to the town is by the Monnow bridge on the local road network. Any proposals for an additional bridge are therefore a matter for Monmouthshire county council as local highway authority. As far as the trunk road network is concerned my present assessment is that there is no requirement for any additional crossing.

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received from CADW about the physical condition of Monnow Bridge, Monmouth. [3571]

Mr. Ron Davies: Monnow Bridge is a scheduled ancient monument under the provisions of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 although it remains in use as a crossing of the River Monnow, Monmouth. Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments is a part of my Department, and monitors the bridge on my behalf. Incidents of damage such as that recently caused by a motor vehicle are reviewed by Cadw with the county council which owns the bridge.

School Transport

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what guidance he plans to issue to local education authorities in Wales about their statutory obligations to provide transport to and from school; [3960]

(2) how many local education authorities in Wales have curtailed spending on school transport in the present year to date; by how much they have done so; and if he will make a statement; [3936]

(3) what assessment he has made of the adequacy of spending by local education authorities in Wales on school transport; [3935]

(4) what is the statutory duty on local education authorities in Wales concerning the provision of free school transport; and what representations he has received from them about their difficulties in carrying out that duty. [3934]

Mr. Hain: Although, home to school transport is the responsibility of individual local education authorities (LEAs) Welsh Office Circular 19/95, issued in May 1995, gives guidance on the statutory obligations of LEAs in their provision of home to school transport, and their discretionary powers. A copy is in the Library of the House. My right hon. Friend has not received any representations from LEAs in respect of their statutory duties. LEAs may operate more generous transport policies than statutorily required but this is at their discretion, in the light of their assessment of local priorities. Details of spending by LEAs in Wales on school transport are not held centrally.

Assisted Places Scheme

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the names of schools in Wales with pupils on the assisted places scheme; and in each case what is the number of pupils and the income which the school recovers from the scheme. [4133]

Mr. Hain: The information requested is shown in the following table:

School	*Number of APS pupils in scheme 1996–97*	*Income from APS in financial year 1996–97*
Christ College	101	490,854
Ffynone House[1]	7	15,075
Howell's, Cardiff	186	504,516
Howell's, Denbigh	83	399,684
Kings Monkton[1]	11	26,805
Llandovery College	69	366,701
Monmouth Boys	146	518,626
Monmouth Girls	82	259,417
Rougemont School[1]	15	34,662
Ruthin School[1]	11	33,952
Rydal Penrhos	142	749,093
St. Clare's School[1]	14	26,527
St. Gerard's School[1]	9	16,869
St. John's College[1]	11	19,539
Total all Wales	887	3,462,320

[1] Joined Scheme in September 1996.

Speech Therapists

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many qualified speech therapists there are in each of the health authorities in Wales. [4458]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The information is given in the following table:

Qualified speech and language therapists

Health Authority area[1]	*Whole-time equivalent number of staff in post at 31 December 1996*[2]
Bro Taf	53
Dyfed Powys	36
Gwent	32
Morgannwg	42
North Wales	60

[1] Staff are employed by NHS Trusts but are shown here under the Health Authority area in which the Trust is situated.
[2] Provisional.

Smoke Detectors

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales which housing associations in Wales have not installed smoke detectors in their housing stock. [4779]

Mr. Win Griffiths: As this is an operational matter for Tai Cymru, I have asked the Chief Executive to collect the data from the housing associations and to write to my hon. Friend direct. A copy of this letter will be placed in the Library.

Hip Replacements

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what reports he has received of the failure rates of operations involving replacement hips using biomet protheses and boneloc cement in *(a)* Rhydlafar hospital and *(b)* other hospitals in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [4491]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The failure rates of operations is a matter for NHS Trusts to address, in liaison with health authorities and GP fundholders. However, the NHS is

immediately informed of any particular product that gives rise for concern via various hazard notices issued by the Department on the advice of the Medical Devices Agency. One such notice on Boneloc was issued in 1995 and I understand that this product was subsequently withdrawn from use.

NHS Expenditure

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his plans in respect of the level of expenditure on the NHS. [4856]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Provision for the NHS in Wales in 1997–98 was £2,368 million. My right hon. Friend will announce provision for 1998–99 in due course.

NHS Service Provision

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the areas of service provision in the NHS which are currently under review by the Welsh Office; and if he will make a statement. [4851]

Mr. Win Griffiths: It is primarily for health authorities to plan for and review service provision in the light of local circumstances and strategic priorities. Currently, the Welsh Office is separately leading reviews of the configuration of NHS trusts, critical care and occupational health services for NHS staff in Wales.

Exports and Imports

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to the statement of the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), of 18 June, *Official Report*, column 245–48, what, for the latest available year, was the total value *(a)* of Welsh exports and *(b)* of Welsh imports. [5130]

Mr. Hain: Export and import statistics are only collected on a UK basis and I am afraid my statement on 18 June was based on a misinterpretation. I intend to write to the hon. Member with an explanation as soon as possible and place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Teacher:Pupil Ratios

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the average teacher:pupil ratio for *(a)* all schools, *(b)* primary and junior schools and *(c)* secondary schools in Wales for each of the last five years for which figures are available, based on planned expenditure; what is the expected teacher:pupil ratio for (i) all schools, (ii) primary and junior schools and (iii) secondary schools in Wales, in each of the next two years; and if he will make a statement. [4871]

Mr. Hain: The following table shows figures for the last five years derived from returns to the Schools' Census. Projections of pupil:teacher ratios are not prepared centrally.

Pupil:teacher ratios within schools[1]

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*
All schools[2]	18.2	18.2	18.4	18.7	18.7
Primary[3]	22.3	22.1	22.3	22.5	22.5
Secondary	15.6	15.7	15.9	16.1	16.0

[1] At January each year. The pupil:teacher ratio shown is the ratio of the total number of full-time equivalent pupils within the sector concerned to the total number of full-time equivalent qualified teachers.
[2] Includes all maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special schools, and independent schools.
[3] Includes all infant, junior with infant, and junior without infant, schools.

Ambulance Service

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the ambulance service provision; and if he will make a statement. [4850]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Latest figures for the year to March 1997 show that on an all Wales basis ambulance trusts have met the patient's charter requirement for responding to emergency calls. The Department has written to the Dyfed Powys and Bro Taf health authorities, where the standard has not been achieved. In addition, a review by ambulance trusts in Wales, which is expected to include reconfiguration options with a view to improving patient services, will be submitted to me next month for consideration.

Cigarette Smokers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many and what percentage of adult *(a)* men and *(b)* women in Wales are cigarette smokers in each 10 year age band; and if he will make a statement. [4770]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The estimated numbers and percentages of adults in Wales who smoke cigarettes at least occasionally are given in the following table. They are based on data from the 1996 Health in Wales Survey carried out by Health Promotion Wales. The survey results are provisional pending publication later in the year.

Percentage and number of adults smoking at least occasionally

Age in years	*18–24*		*25–34*		*35–44*		*45–54*		*55–64*		*18–64*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Men	38,000	33.9	66,000	34.9	68,000	34.3	67,000	33.9	50,000	30.0	288,000	33.5
Women	36,000	32.5	63,000	32.6	57,000	28.5	56,000	28.9	40,000	25.4	251,000	29.4

Source:

1996 Health in Wales Survey (sample size 9,003).

HEALTH

Hospital Performance Ratings

3. **Mr. John M. Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hospitals achieved five-star performance ratings in the last year for which figures are available. [3468]

Mr. Milburn: The last year for which figures are available is the period ended 31 March 1996, when 397 out of a total of 400 trusts achieved five stars for at least one indicator in the Tables, 42 achieved five stars in all categories. I plan to publish the figures for the period to 31 March 1997 in the NHS Performance Tables on 9 July 1997.

Surrogacy

5. **Mr. Wills:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to review the law relating to surrogacy. [3470]

Ms Jowell: As I announced on 11 June, at columns *478–79*, following public concern, UK health ministers have invited a small team to carry out a review of the existing law on surrogacy. The terms of reference and membership of this review were set out in the *Official Report*, and are as follows:

To consider whether payments, including expenses, to surrogate mothers should continue to be allowed, and if so, on what basis;

to examine whether there is a case for the regulation of surrogacy arrangements through a recognised body or bodies; and if so to advise on the scope and operation of such arrangements;

in the light of the above, to advise whether changes are needed to the Surrogacy Arrangements Act 1985 and/or section 30 of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990.

The review team is lead by Margaret Brazier, Professor of Law at Manchester University. The other team members are Susan Golombok, Professor of Psychology at the City University, London and Alastair Campbell, Professor of Ethics in Medicine, University of Bristol.

Accident and Emergency Services

9. **Mr. Cunliffe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review the accident and emergency services in the Leigh and Greater Manchester area. [3474]

Mr. Milburn: The proposed change in opening hours of the minor injuries unit at Leigh Infirmary has now been referred to Ministers who will be considering this in the near future. The issue of accident and emergency services across Greater Manchester is a matter for individual health authorities.

Social Service Funding

17. **Mr. Garnier:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the overall funding made by his Department for social services. [3483]

Mr. Boateng: The Government's aim is to ensure that social services is fairly funded, and that those people who require services receive appropriate, good quality, cost-effective services.

Children (Domestic Violence)

21. **Mr. Dawson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to protect children from domestic violence. [3487]

Mr. Boateng: The Government are firmly committed to ensuring that women and children are better protected against the impact of all forms of violence. We recognise that exposure to domestic violence can have a profoundly damaging impact on the health and development of children, as well as on women. Over the coming months, we shall be launching the Department's strategy for making domestic violence a higher priority for health and social services.

Life Expectancy

22. **Mr. Waterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to increase life expectancy. [3488]

Ms Jowell: We will fulfil our manifesto commitments to tackle the root causes of ill-health and we shall set new goals for improving health which recognise the impact of poverty, unemployment, poor housing and a polluted environment.

Locality Commissioning Projects

23. **Ms Blears:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will take steps to encourage general practitioners to work together in locality commissioning projects. [3490]

Mr. Milburn: We mean to work with all in the NHS to develop new arrangements which best meet our objectives of providing high quality care to all on the basis of need. We wish to develop local commissioning and have already begun to meet the GP representative groups to explore how best to build on good practice wherever we may find it.

NHS Pharmacists Bill

24. **Mr. Rammell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to introduce the NHS Pharmacists Bill. [3491]

Mr. Milburn: We have no immediate plans to introduce an NHS Pharmacists Bill.

Bureaucracy

25. **Mr. McNulty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to reduce waste in the national health service. [3492]

Mr. Milburn: On 22 May we announced a programme of measures to remove the bureaucratic processes of the internal market and reduce management costs by £100 million this year. We will be looking for further reductions in 1998–99 and beyond.

Dental Services

26. **Mr. Keetch:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the role of community dental services. [3493]

Mr. Milburn: The Community Dental Service has an important role in providing a range of services to help improve and maintain the oral health of the population.

Redbridge and Waltham Forest

27. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he next plans to visit Redbridge and Waltham Forest to discuss the financial deficits of local trusts and the health authority. [3494]

Mr. Milburn: My Ministerial colleagues and I will be visiting as many NHS organisations as we can over the coming months, and this may include Redbridge and Waltham Forest. We recognise the difficulties faced by health authorities and trusts, particularly the many who entered the financial year in deficit, and will be working with the service to rebuild the NHS.

NHS Trusts (Deficits)

28. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he proposes to take to avoid *(a)* reductions in the level of service and *(b)* asset sales by health service trusts which are expecting a financial deficit in the current year. [3495]

Mr. Milburn: Health Authorities and Trusts must work together to return to financial stability. For their part, the Government are committed to raising spending on the NHS in real terms every year and to ensuring that more of every pound spent goes on patient care, not bureaucracy. Proceeds from the disposal of trust assets are available to finance capital investments to improve patient care.

Consultation

29. **Mr. Pearson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review NHS guidelines on consultation. [3496]

Mr. Milburn: We shall be considering the current arrangements for consultation on major service changes in due course.

Hospital Ward Closures (North Thames Region)

30. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress he has made in reversing ward closures in hospitals in the North Thames region of the NHS. [3497]

Mr. Milburn: We have inherited a difficult legacy in terms of pressure on the health service, in the North Thames region as elsewhere. The National Health Service Chief Executive has asked health authorities and NHS trusts to ensure that the current resources of the NHS are used to maximum effect.

Breast Cancer Services

31. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve breast cancer services for women. [3499]

Mr. Boateng: The Government have signalled their commitment to make cancer a priority and will direct savings achieved from cuts in the costs of the National Health Service internal market into patient care. As a first step, £10 million has been made available for breast cancer services to speed access to diagnosis, reduce waiting times for treatment and support networks of specialist teams.

Silicone Breast Implants

32. **Mr. Desmond Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the safety of silicone breast implants. [3500]

Mr. Boateng: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Mrs. Clwyd) on 16 June at column *26-27.*

Elderly People (Care)

33. **Ms Walley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of the eligibility criteria on continuing care for the elderly. [3501]

Mr. Boateng: The National Health Service Executive issued an Executive Letter (EL(96)89) in October 1996 which reported on an evaluation of the early impact of the continuing health care guidance and set out issues which health authorities and social services departments should address. We will be considering the implications of a more recent evaluation for the development of continuing health care services. Copies of EL(96)89 are available in the Library.

GP Fundholders (Croydon)

34. **Mr. Ottaway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of NHS patients are covered by GP fundholders in Croydon. [3502]

Mr. Milburn: 37 per cent. of the registered population of Croydon Health Authority is served by a General Practitioner fundholding practice.

NHS Funding (Northern England)

35. **Mr. Mitchell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to review the funding allocations to the north of England with particular reference to the role of the market forces factor. [3503]

Mr. Milburn: We shall honour the health authority revenue allocations agreed in 1997–98 by the previous Government.

We will look at how resources are distributed across both secondary and primary care, to ensure that these fully reflect local population needs and operate as fairly as possible.

Public Health Minister

36. **Mr. Stott:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the role and work of the Minister with responsibility for public health. [3504]

Ms Jowell: I will be working to take forward our manifesto commitments to improve the overall health of the nation, setting targets which recognise the impact on health of poverty, poor housing, unemployment and a polluted environment.

I will be working closely with colleagues in other Government Departments on issues such as food safety and use of Lottery funds for health projects. Work has already been put in train to address some of the crucial issues on the public health agenda. For instance:

- a White Paper on tobacco and a draft Bill to ban tobacco advertising are both in preparation for the summer;

work is in hand to enable midweek Lottery funds to be used to create a network of Healthy Living Centres.

the Ministerial Group on Food Safety, of which both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are members, have started work on developing the new Food Standards Agency.

We plan to outline our new health strategy at a conference on 7 July.

Hospital Closures (Mental and Psychiatric Care)

37. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans Her Majesty's Government have to review the policy of the closure of the larger hospitals providing mental and psychiatric care; and if he will make a statement. [3505]

Mr. Boateng: We are concerned to ensure that a high standard of mental and psychiatric care is available to those who require it in an appropriate setting; planned closure of the larger hospitals will take place in that context as part of the development of a comprehensive mental health service offering a range of inpatient and community provision.

Hepatitis C

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for compensation for haemophiliacs infected with Hepatitis C as a result of treatment by the national health service. [1905]

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to pay compensation to people infected with Hepatitis C contracted through blood transfusions in NHS hospitals. [3633]

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received since 2 May with regard to people with haemophilia who have been infected with Hepatitis C via contaminated blood products; and what plans he has to review their claim for financial recompense. [4180]

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his proposals to set up a hardship fund for the haemophiliacs who may have been infected with Hepatitis C through blood supplied by the national health service. [5125]

Ms Jowell: Since 2 May, in addition to these Parliamentary Questions, Ministers have received 19 letters on the subject of financial recompense for patients, both haemophiliacs and others, infected with hepatitis C through National Health Service treatment.

We have agreed to give this matter our most careful consideration.

Adoption

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the rule concerning the age of adopting parents as a criterion for approving overseas adoption; and how many and what proportion of applicants with a prospective parent over 60 years of age have been *(a)* approved and *(b)* rejected (i) in 1996–97 and (ii) in each of the last five years. [4234]

Mr. Boateng: The minimum age for prospective adopters in England and Wales is 21 years. There is no legal upper age limit. However, age is just one factor among many which must be taken into account when assessing the suitability of applicants. Figures on the acceptability of prospective adopters are not held centrally.

Radiotherapy

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to compensate female patients who have suffered serious physical damage following post-operative radiotherapy to treat breast cancer; and if he will make a statement. [4836]

Ms Jowell: The Government have every sympathy with women who have suffered adverse side-effects as a consequence of radiotherapy treatment. However, it is a longstanding principle that compensation should be paid by the National Health Service only when there is evidence that negligence has been involved.

The following action has been taken to help women with damage as a result of radiotherapy for breast cancer:

In May 1994 the Department issued guidance entitled "Quality Assurance in Radiotherapy—A Quality Management System for Radiotherapy".

The Royal College of Radiologists at the Department's request, convened a small group of professionals and lay people in autumn 1994 to consider guidelines for care of women who have suffered tissue damage following radiotherapy for breast cancer. This report was issued to the NHS by the Department in October 1995.

The Royal College of Radiologists carried out a confidential clinical review of 126 women who had suffered injury following radiotherapy treatment for breast cancer at 15 centres in the period 1980–1993. The report makes recommendations on the management of breast cancer, particularly on radiotherapy, and for further research.

With regard to those suffering adverse effects following pelvic radiotherapy for gynaecological cancers, in 1996, a Working Group, which includes representatives from a number of Royal Colleges, voluntary organisations and the Department, was set up to consider the preparation of patient information leaflets concerning possible adverse effects following pelvic radiotherapy and to raise awareness generally. A sub-group is also considering issuing guidelines for health professionals on the care of women suffering adverse effects as a result of pelvic radiotherapy.

Hernias

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the use of homeopathy for the treatment of patients, before and after undergoing a surgical hernia operation; and if he will make a statement; [4781]

(2) what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on complementary and alternative medicine for the treatment of (i) a hernia and (ii) patients before and after undergoing a surgical hernia operation; and if he will make a statement; [4780]

(3) what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on alternatives to surgery for the treatment of hernias; and if he will make a statement. [4725]

Ms Jowell: We have not commissioned research, nor are we aware of any published studies, relating to alternative and complementary treatments in groin hernia surgery. The Department of Health does, however, support the Surgical Epidemiology and Audit Unit at the Royal College of Surgeons which is engaged in a systematic review of previous research literature on groin hernia surgery. Additionally, the Department of Health is supporting work by the Research Council for Complementary Medicine to develop clinical audit methodologies for use by practitioners of complementary medicine. This includes homeopathy, but is not related to the management of groin hernia.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hernias have been diagnosed in each of the last 10 years, how many required surgery; and if he will make a statement. [4728]

Ms Jowell: We are unable to provide the information in the form requested. The information that is available is set out in the table. It shows those cases admitted to hospital where the primary diagnosis was hernia of the abdominal cavity and covers the years 1989–90 to 1994–95. We are unable to provide information about the number of patients who have their hernias diagnosed and/or treated outside National Health Service hospitals.

Year	*1989–90*	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
Finished Consultant episodes with primary diagnosis of hernia abdominal cavity	128,732	128,798	135,031	135,289	145,430	154,503
Finished Consultant episodes with primary diagnosis of hernia of abdominal cavity, where a hernia repair operation was performed	91,120	90,975	95,978	92,950	96,712	101,704

Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics (HES).
ICD 9 Diagnosis codes 550 to 553 and OPCS4R Operating codes T19 to T26.

Alternative and Complementary Medicine

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many practitioners of (i) alternative and (ii) complementary medicine *(a)* are registered in England currently, *(b)* were registered in 1992 and *(c)* were registered in 1987. [4596]

Ms Jowell: The information requested is not available. Some complementary and alternative medicine organisations maintain, on a voluntary basis, a register of their membership. It is not necessary for a practitioner to register with any organisation in order to practise.

When the Osteopaths Act 1993 and Chiropractors Act 1994 are fully implemented, statutory registers will exist for these two professions.

Drugs

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the total amount *(a)* spent and *(b)* allocated by his Department on tackling the problems relating to drugs in respect of (i) developing prevention publicity, education and community action and (ii) improving treatment and rehabilitation, for (1) 1994, (2) 1995, (3) 1996 and (4) 1997. [4796]

Ms Jowell: Information on total Government and individual departments' expenditure on tackling drug misuse is not recorded on an annual basis. The most recently available estimates were published in the White Paper "Tackling Drugs Together" in May 1995. They show that at least £526 million of expenditure in 1993–94 could be directly attributable to drug programmes and activities across the United Kingdom.

The Government will be appointing a "drug czar" to co-ordinate action against drugs, working to the President of the Council as Chair of the Cabinet's coordinating committee on drug misuse. One of his or her first tasks will be to review urgently the existing drugs strategy, and put forward proposals for tackling the problem with renewed vigour. This review will include current Government expenditure.

Asthma

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children are recognised as suffering from asthma currently; and how many were registered *(a)* in 1992 and *(b)* in 1987. [4595]

Ms Jowell: There are no comprehensive data on the number of children with asthma. It is estimated to affect between 4 and 6 per cent. of children in England sufficiently severely to require regular medical supervision.

According to data collected by the Royal College of General Practitioners, the mean weekly incidence of new general practitioner episodes of asthma in children per 100,000 population in England in selected years was as follows:

	Age group	
	0–4	*5–14*
1987	74.4	58.9
1992	147.8	84.2
1996[1]	104.7	63.7

Source:
Royal College of General Practitioners Weekly Returns Service.
Note:
[1] Most recent year available.

Cystic Fibrosis

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the conclusions of the review into cystic fibrosis screening commissioned by the NHS Executive Research and Development Health Technology Assessment Programme will be announced. [5000]

Ms Jowell: The findings of the research undertaken in the National Health Service Executive Research and Development Health Technology Assessment's project on screening for cystic fibrosis are expected to be available publicly by the end of 1997.

Prescription Charges

Ms Hewitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review the system of prescription charges for hormone replacement therapy with special reference to the requirement to pay two prescription charges for certain courses of treatment. [5063]

Mr. Milburn: We will be examining the whole question of prescription charges, as part of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. The Government remains committed to the historic principle of the National Health Service that health services will be available to all and access will be based on need, not on ability to pay.

Sight Testing Scheme

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the cost of administering the NHS sight testing scheme in *(a)* 1995–96 and *(b)* 1996–97. [5253]

Mr. Milburn: It would involve disproportionate cost to identify this information from within health authorities' overall expenditure on the administration of the family health services.

Cash Limits

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what changes will be made to the cash limits of his Department in 1997–98. [5468]

Mr. Dobson: The cash limit for Class XI, Vote 1 (Hospital, community health, family health and related services, England) will be reduced by £13,000,000 (from £29,362,456,000 to £29,349,456,000). This allows for a transfer to Class IX, Vote 1 (Department for Education and Employment: programmes and central services) as part of the funding for the merger of the Imperial College and the West London Medical School.

The decrease will be offset by an increase to another Vote and will not therefore change the planned total of Public expenditure.

Radiotherapy Overdoses (Compensation)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has for a compensation plan for those suffering as a result of receiving the wrong dosage of radiotherapy; and if he will make a statement. [4764]

Ms Jowell: The Government have every sympathy with women who have suffered adverse side-effects as a consequence of radiotherapy treatment. Where people have been harmed by clinical treatment and negligence can be shown to have caused this, compensation may be sought through the courts. However, it is a longstanding principle that compensation should only be paid by the NHS when there is evidence that negligence has been involved.

The following action has been taken to help women with damage as a result of radiotherapy for breast cancer:

In May 1994 the Department issued guidance entitled "Quality Assurance in Radiotherapy—A Quality Management System for Radiotherapy".

The Royal College of Radiologists at the Department's request, convened a small group of professionals and lay people in Autumn 1994 to consider guidelines for care of women who have suffered tissue damage following radiotherapy for breast cancer. This report was issued to the NHS by the Department in October 1995.

The Royal College of Radiologists carried out a confidential clinical review of 126 women who had suffered injury following radiotherapy treatment for breast cancer at 15 centres in the period 1980–93. The report makes recommendations on the management of breast cancer, particularly on radiotherapy, and for further research.

With regard to those suffering adverse effects following pelvic radiotherapy for gynaecological cancers, in 1996, a Working Group, which includes representatives from a number of Royal Colleges, voluntary organisations and the Department, was set up to consider the preparation of patient information leaflets concerning possible adverse effects following pelvic radiotherapy and to raise awareness generally. A sub-group is also considering issuing guidelines for health professionals on the care of women suffering adverse effects as a result of pelvic radiotherapy.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with representatives of those suffering as a result of radiotherapy overdoses; and if he will make a statement. [4763]

Ms Jowell: Representatives of those suffering as a result of radiotherapy treatment-both RAGE BREAST and RAGE NATIONAL have asked to meet Ministers to outline their aims and concerns. I am glad to report that my Noble Friend the Minister of State, Baroness Jay has agreed to see a joint representation from both these organisations.

Occupational Health Services

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Government have to review the guidelines for occupational health services for NHS staff. [3489]

Mr. Milburn: Following detailed consultation with professional bodies, Health Service Guidelines for Occupational Health (HSG(94)51) were issued in December 1994. This guidance took into account the recommendations of the "Clothier" report on former nurse Beverley Allitt. In the light of the publication of the "Bullock Report" (the inquiry into the events surrounding the conviction of Amanda Jenkinson) we are considering whether the existing guidance can be further improved.

Regional Health Authorities

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost to the NHS of the reinstatement of regional health authorities. [3479]

Mr. Milburn: We have no plans to reinstate regional health authorities, and no estimates of the cost of doing so have been made.

Speech Impediments

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on NHS provision for those with stammers or other speech impediments. [3498]

Mr. Boateng: We are well aware of the importance of providing speech and language therapy for people where there is evidence that they can benefit from the service. Decisions about the amount of funding available for these services are the responsibility of health commissioners, who have to take account of the resources needed for the other services to the local population for which they are responsible.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Landfill Sites (BSE Waste)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Ministers of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) when the Environment Agency investigations into landfill sites which have accommodated BSE waste will be *(a)* completed *(b)* published; [2828]

(2) when the Spongiform Encephalitis Advisory Committee will report on safe ways of disposing of BSE-infected material; and when that report will be published. [2829]

Mr. Rooker: The Environment Agency's assessment of landfill sites which took cattle affected, or suspected of being affected, with BSE before sufficient carcase incineration capacity came on stream in 1991 to process the number of cases that were coming forward is now completed.

The Agency is considering how best to publish the assessment, and related work, and aims to do so shortly. The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) has noted the methodology used by the Environment Agency in assessing the various disposal routes for cattle derived waste and is content with the conclusions of the reports.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 25 June 1997

HOME DEPARTMENT

Crime Prevention

Mr. Gunnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to give local authorities a statutory obligation to co-ordinate local initiatives to prevent crime and develop plans to make them more effective. [4811]

Mr. Michael: We intend to place a new responsibility on local authorities and the police service jointly to develop statutory local partnerships for crime prevention and community safety and to agree, with the key partners, local community safety targets. Our proposals will be developed on the basis of full consultation with all interested parties. This will be included in the forthcoming Crime and Disorder Bill.

Prisoners (Conditions)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what instructions he has given to the Prison Service to ensure that wherever possible convicted prisoners should serve their sentences in prisons within reasonable travelling distance of close relatives. [4610]

Ms Joyce Quin: Prison Rule 31 provides that special attention should be paid to the maintenance of such relationships between a prisoner and his family as are desirable in the best interests of both. Circular Instruction 7/1988, a copy of which is available in the Library, sets out the principles governing the allocation of convicted adult male prisoners. Similar instructions exist for women and males under 21 years of age. The needs of the individual prisoner, including the facilitating of visits, is one of four priorities governing allocation.

Wherever possible, prisoners are located close to their home and family. However, security is the primary consideration in a prisoner's allocation and account must also be taken of the need to maintain good order and control and, particularly because of the current population pressures, the need to make best use of the estate.

Internet

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his Department's estimate of the percentage of content providers on the Internet who publish material unsuitable for children but are currently taking part in voluntary self-certification. [4902]

Mr. Michael: Information is not available in the form requested. However, I understand from figures compiled in April by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), the independent industry body set up last year, that some 7 per cent. (1,419) if sites which are rated with the Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC), the voluntary content ratings system developed by the RSAC in the United States of America, are in the United Kingdom. There is no United Kingdom rating system available, although the IWF hope to report shortly on their recommendations for the development of a self-rating system suitable for the United Kingdom, to which major Internet Service Providers would subscribe.

Patrick Nichols

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the tariff recommended by *(a)* the trial judge, *(b)* the Lord Chief Justice and *(c)* the Home Secretary in the case of Patrick Nichols; what length of sentence he has already served; and what are the reasons for his continued detention. [3517]

Ms Joyce Quin: The trial judge and the Lord Chief Justice both recommended 13 years, and that was the period set by the then Home Secretary.

Mr. Nichols has served 22 years in custody. For reasons which have been explained to him, the Parole Board has not considered it appropriate to recommend release. Without such a recommendation, my right hon. Friend has no power to release Mr. Nichols.

Treason and Piracy (Maximum Penalties)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many years have elapsed since the maximum penalties in force on the statute book for *(a)* treason and *(b)* piracy were applied. [4647]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 20 June 1997]:* The last execution for the offence of treason was 41 years ago in 1946. In 1945 there were three persons sentenced to death for treason. One of the sentences was commuted to penal servitude. William Joyce (Lord Haw Haw) was executed in 1946 for treason. The other offender, Thomas Cooper, who had joined the German army at the age of twenty (his mother was of German origin) was reprieved in 1946 and ended up with a life sentence, of which he served seven years.

Historical records indicate that the last two executions for the offence of piracy took place 167 years ago in 1830.

Immigration Offences

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the number of prosecutions that have been undertaken against foreign nationals for immigration offices, indicating *(a)* the offence, *(b)* the outcomes and *(c)* the maximum sentences passed for the last 12 months for which figures are available. [5340]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 24 June 1997]:* Court data for prosecutions of foreign nationals by the type of immigration offence committed are given in the tables:

Information given is for 1995 (latest available).

Table A. Number of defendants prosecuted at magistrates' courts and convicted at all courts for offences under the Immigration Act 1971 by type of offence and result, 1995

England and Wales

Offence[1] description	Proceeded against	Found guilty	Total sentenced	Absolute or conditional discharge	Fine	Community sentence	Fully suspended sentence	Immediate custody	Otherwise dealt with
Entering UK in breach of a deportation order [Sec 24 (1) (a)]	3	2	2	—	2	—	—	—	—
Entering UK without leave [Sec 24 (1) (a)]	24	15	10	—	8	—	—	2	—
Overstaying time limit of leave [Sec 24 (1) (b) (i), 24 (1) (c)]	11	6	6	1	—	1	—	4	—
Failure to observe conditions of leave [Sec 24 (10) (b) (ii), 24 (1) (d)]	11	5	5	3	2	—	—	—	—
Failure to observe restrictions under Schedule 2 or 3 as to reporting to police or an Immigration Officer as to residence [Sec 24 (1) (e)]	9	3	3	1	1	—	—	1	—
Foreign national failing to register with police or to produce documents etc. [Sec 26 (1) (f)]	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Failing to supply necessary information when staying at hotels etc. [Sec 26 (1) (f)]	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

[1] Principal immigration offence.

Table B. Number of offenders fined at magistrates' courts for offences under the Immigration Act 1971 by type of offence and amount of fine, 1995

England and Wales

Offence[1] description	Total fined	Amount of fine £50	£100	£150	£200	£250	£400	£500
Entering UK in breach of a deportation order [Sec 24 (1) (a)]	2	1	—	—	—	—	1	—
Entering UK without leave [Sec 24 (1) (a)]	8	—	3	—	1	3	—	1
Overstaying time limit of leave [Sec 24 (1) (b) (i), 24 (1) (c)]	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Failure to observe conditions of leave [Sec 24 (10) (b) (ii), 24 (1) (d)]	2	—	1	1	—	—	—	—
Failure to observe restrictions under Schedule 2 or 3 as to reporting to police or an Immigration Officer as to residence [Sec 24 (1) (e)]	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	—
Foreign national failing to register with police or to produce documents etc. [Sec 26 (1) (f)]	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Failing to supply necessary information when staying at hotels etc. [Sec 26 (1) (f)]	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

[1] Principal immigration offence.

Table C. Number of offenders sentenced to immediate custody at magistrates' courts for offences under the Immigration Act 1971 by type of offence and length of sentence, 1995

England and Wales

Offence[1] description	Total immediate custody	Length of sentence given 14 days	One month	Two months	Three months
Entering UK in breach of a deportation order [Sec 24(1)(a)]	—	—	—	—	—
Entering UK without leave [Sec 24(1)(a)]	2	—	—	—	2
Overstaying time limit of leave [Sec 24(1)(b)(i), 24(1)(c)]	4	—	1	3	—
Failure to observe conditions of leave [Sec 24(10)(b)(ii), 24(1)(d)]	—	—	—	—	—
Failure to observe restrictions under Schedule 2 or 3 as to reporting to police or an Immigration Officer as to residence [Sec 24(1)(e)]	1	1	—	—	—
Foreign national failing to register with police or to produce documents etc. [Sec 26(1)(f)]	—	—	—	—	—
Failing to supply necessary information when staying at hotels etc. [Sec 26(1)(f)]	—	—	—	—	—

[1] Principal immigration offence.

Entry Clearance

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will initiate a fast track system for those who have been refused admission under the primary purpose rule to apply for entry clearance. [4008]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I have been asked to reply.

In cases where an application has been refused solely on primary purpose grounds and an appeal is pending the Home Office will remit the papers to the Entry Clearance Officer for issue of entry clearance, subject to there being no change of circumstances. Cases which were deferred at posts pending an announcement by the Home Secretary will now be reviewed and where primary purpose would have been the only ground for refusal, again subject to no change of circumstances, entry clearance will be issued. Where no application or appeal is pending, applicants may re-apply for entry clearance in the normal way.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Departmental Staff

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time persons employed by his Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4.00 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3.00 an hour. [4198]

Mr. Prescott: The number of staff paid less than the levels shown is as follows:

	Staff
£4.00 an hour	1,246
£3.50 an hour	717
£3.00 an hour	35

These estimates reflect current salary levels and staff numbers, which will vary considerably over time. Part-time and full-time staff are paid the same hourly rates.

Environmental Task Force

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to set up the environmental task force. [4479]

Ms Angela Eagle: We are proposing to launch the New Deal Programme shortly, including the Environmental Task Force, which will be one of the four options on offer.

Areas of Outstanding National Beauty

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the process of consulting on the future funding of areas of outstanding natural beauty; and when a consultation document will be made available. [4613]

Ms Angela Eagle: Ministers will shortly be considering these matters with the Countryside Commission, including the question of a consultation document.

Water Charges

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for further consultation on future policy relating to water charges; and if he will make a statement. [5091]

Mr. Meacher: As the Deputy Prime Minister announced at the Water Summit, the Government is to review the system of charging for water in England and Wales. I am launching that review today. The purpose of the review is to ensure that we have a fair and sustainable system of charging for water and sewerage services.

The review will be conducted jointly by my Department and the Welsh Office, in consultation with the Office of Water Services. My Department will be writing today to interested bodies with details of the main issues which the review will address and inviting their representations. A copy of the letter has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

There is public concern about the system of charging for water. Water and sewerage services have to be paid for, but customers are entitled to expect that the basis on which their charges are levied is a fair one. The method of charging should have the support of customers as well as water companies.

The review will look at the various methods of charging for mains water and sewerage services, including both unmeasured and measured systems. Under Section 145 of the Water Industry Act 1991, water companies must not base their charges on rateable values after 31 March 2000. The review will consider the future use of rateable values and other possible bases for unmeasured charges, such as the use of council tax bands. It will also consider debt recovery arrangements.

We have made clear our opposition to compulsory metering for essential household use of water. We will also want to look very carefully at the issues of disconnection and the use of budget payment meters for household water supplies: no one should be deprived of water because of inability to pay for it. We will consider these issues in the review. But we do want to have views from all the interested parties before we bring forward proposals for changes in the present regime.

The overall level of water charges and the system of price limits set by the water regulator will not be considered in this review.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review Planning Policy Guidance Note 8 as it affects the siting and erection of telecommunication masts. [4993]

Mr. Raynsford: We have no immediate plans to review the basic approach of Planning Policy Guidance note 8 to the siting and erection of telecommunication masts. Work is in hand with representatives of local planning authorities and telecommunications code system operators to review the working of the Code of Best Practice for Telecommunications Prior Approval Procedures as applied to Mast/Tower Development, which was published by my Department last year.

House Building

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will establish a review into the methods by which developments in environmentally friendly design and the use of sustainable materials can be incorporated into future house building programmes; and if he will make a statement. [4878]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department is supporting research on a wide range of projects aimed at increasing understanding and awareness of, and promoting, more sustainable construction. I shall be launching new construction innovation and research business plans on 4 July. Sustainable construction will be a major theme. We are also examining how dissemination and take up of research and best practice can be improved and made more effective.

Organophosphates

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the effects on the environment of the use of organophosphates. [4913]

Ms Angela Eagle: The Environment Agency keeps the environmental effects of organophosphates under review through its monitoring programmes. I have arranged for a copy of its recently published report "Pesticides in the Aquatic Environment 1995" to be placed in the Library. The Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme, run by the Agriculture Departments, monitors the impact of agricultural pesticides, including organophosphates, on wildlife. Approvals of organophosphate pesticides and veterinary medicines are reviewed by the Advisory Committee on Pesticides and the Veterinary Products Committee. Agricultural pesticides including organophosphates are also subject to the European Community rolling review programme under Council Directive 91/414. The Veterinary Products Committee reviewed organophosphate sheep-dips earlier this year and its recommendations are currently being put into place. There are also many research projects addressing the effects of organophosphates on the environment including those funded by the Natural Environment Research Council. The Government is considering whether any further action to reduce the effects of organophosphates on the environment is necessary.

Mine Water

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review progress made to date in cleaning contaminated mine water; and what plans he has to enhance the current clean-up programme. [4919]

Ms Angela Eagle: Last year, the Environment Agency and the Coal Authority identified for further study a priority list of 35 serious mine water discharges from abandoned coal mines in England and Wales which need remedial pollution treatment, and which are being monitored by the Environment Agency during 1997. Following discussions with the Environment Agency and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, the Coal Authority has undertaken 14 detailed feasibility studies on the most environmentally damaging discharges and allocated over £2 million principally to tackle four priority sites during 1997–98. I am reviewing the need for further action to clean-up contaminated mine water sites.

Local Authority Changes

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to revise the current list of charges which local authorities can make. [5074]

Mr. Raynsford: We are currently consulting local authority and business interests on draft Regulations allowing local authorities to recover costs for certain highway and transport services. I have placed a copy of the consultation version of the Regulations in the Library of the House. We hope to lay the Regulations before the summer recess.

Council Tax

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to create new council tax bands below the current band A and above band E. [4885]

Mr. Raynsford: The question of whether any changes should be made to the structure of the council tax valuation bands is one that the Government will wish to discuss with the Local Government Association and others before reaching a view.

Organic Production

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will examine occasions in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Germany where water companies have (i) encouraged organic agriculture and (ii) promoted the marketing of organic produce from farmers within their watersheds with a view to promoting examples of best practice within the industry; and if he will make a statement. [4887]

Ms Angela Eagle: Water suppliers have an interest in any initiatives which prevent pollution of drinking water sources and work closely with the farming community to protect catchments. My right hon. Friend, the Minister of Agriculture has general responsibility for organic farming; it would be interesting to learn of any specific initiatives by water suppliers either here or in Germany to encourage organic farming and the promotion of organic produce.

Rat Control

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) who has the responsibility for rat control in public sewers; and what steps he has taken to monitor performance in this area; [5156]

(2) what plans he has to review the duties and responsibilities of the sewerage undertakings with respect to the funding of sewer baiting programmes to control the rat population. [5155]

Ms Angela Eagle: No one body has overall responsibility for rodent control because of the diverse factors involved in dealing with both the causes and effects of rodent infestations. Sewerage undertakers have programmes to control and reduce the number of rats

entering sewers and the funding of these programmes is a matter for each undertaker. All undertakers monitor the level of rat infestation in their sewers and I understand that the water industry will be undertaking some research in this area early next year. Local authorities have the power to take action if the drainage systems in their area pose a threat to public health and this helps to ensure that sewerage undertakers maintain a sufficient programme to control the rat population. I have no plans to review the duties or monitor the performance of sewerage undertakers in this field.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when it is proposed to review the approved document to part H of the Building Regulations; and what plans he has to strengthen the advice on the prevention of damage *(a)* by rates and *(b)* from high pressure water jetting for cleaning drains. [5158]

Mr. Raynsford: We propose to begin a review of the Approved Document to Part H of the Building Regulations next year, when we will consider whether the advice on prevention of damage by rats and from high pressure water jetting needs to be strengthened.

Water Abstraction

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to discourage water companies from abstracting water from rivers. [5270]

Ms Angela Eagle: Abstraction of water from rivers is subject to licensing requirements, set out in Chapter II of the Water Resources Act 1991 and administered by the Environment Agency. At the Water Summit we held in May, we made it clear to water companies that they must make stringent efforts to improve their management of the demand for water. We also said that we would review the water abstraction licensing system, with a key aim of ensuring that the needs of the environment are given due weight in licensing decisions. That review is currently underway.

Cash Limits

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to change the cash and running cost limits and external financing limits within his responsibility for 1997–98. [5592]

Mr. Prescott: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates, the following changes will be made.

The cash limit for Class VI, Vote 2—Regeneration and Countryside and Wildlife–will be increased by £27,000,000 from £1,453,168,000 to £1,480,168,000. The increase, which will be met by a call on the Reserve, is required for the Urban Regeneration Agency (English Partnerships) to continue with the clearing and preparation of the Greenwich Peninsula site for the Millennium Exhibition.

The external financing limit for the Urban Regeneration Agency (English Partnerships) will be increased by £27,000,000 from £177,779,000 to £204,779,000.

The cash limit for Class VI, Vote 5 (Administration) covering sections A to J of that Vote, will be increased by £1,146,000 from £393,455,000 to £394,601,000. This change reflects: a new Section (G) for payments of £50,000 in respect of the sale of the Housing Corporation Loan Portfolio; a new Section (H) for payments of £61,000 in respect of the privatisation costs of the Building Research Establishment; a new Section (I) to make a payment of £1,085,000 to the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in respect of client deposits; a new Section (J) with a net provision of £1,000 in order to allow short term loans to be made to the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre; a reduction of £51,000 to provision for Section A in order to find the increases sought for Sections G and J.

A part payment of £500,000 from the £1,085,000 for client deposits to the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, for which provision is being sought in the new Section I, is required urgently. Pending approval of the Supplementary Estimate for Class VI, Vote 5, expenditure on this new service will therefore be met by repayable advances from the Contingencies fund.

All the increases will be offset by savings, transfers or will be charged to the reserve and will therefore not add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Bus Regulation

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to pursue his commitment to the proper regulation of buses. [5632]

Dr. Strang: As part of the fundamental review of transport policy announced by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on 5 June at column 226. I announced in a speech to the Confederation of Passenger Transport earlier today a wide ranging bus review. Its purpose is to examine how buses can best play their part in an integrated transport policy. Our aim is to see increased use of the bus as a means of reducing congestion and pollution, particularly by attracting motorists from their cars.

The review will look at all aspects of buses including: the scope for more effective use of bus priority measures, coupled as necessary with traffic restraint; better arrangements for passenger information and ticketing, including inter-modal travel; and regulatory and other measures to improve the quality of bus services, notably through the "quality partnership" approach between operators and local authorities. In addition, it will address financial issues such as costs and support for the industry.

I intend to consult fully with the industry, local authorities, bus users and other interest groups, building on the joint work that has previously been done in this area. The results of the review will form part of the proposed White Paper next Spring on integrated transport policy.

EU Transport Council

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the result of the Transport Council held in Luxembourg on 17 and 18 June. [5794]

Dr. Strang: The Transport Council met in Luxembourg on 17 and 18 June. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and I represented the United Kingdom.

My right hon. Friend made a statement emphasising the importance the Government attaches to Europe and stressing the constructive approach the United Kingdom would seek to take.

The Council reached political agreement on a Directive to co-ordinate and improve Member States' arrangements for safety inspection of third country aircraft using EU airports. The United Kingdom, supported by Germany, asked for a statement to be entered in the Council minutes making clear that we would have preferred the Directive to apply also to EU aircraft.

The Council agreed conclusions on Community involvement in the EUROCONTROL organisation, which co-ordinates air traffic management arrangements within Europe, and on work towards the creation of a new European aviation safety organisation.

The Council held a further discussion on a draft directive on the levels of heavy goods vehicle taxation and of road user charges for those Member States which levy a specific charge for the use of their motorways. By qualified majority (with Germany opposing) the Council agreed a Regulation which will require new commercial vehicles to be fitted with electronic tachographs when such instruments have been type approved. This was the only item on which the Council took a vote. The United Kingdom secured an amendment intended to ensure that the security of new electronic tachograph products will be properly tested before they are approved for use.

The Council debated road safety, and agreed conclusions which, in particular, encouraged the Commission to take forward ideas on exchange of best practice. The Council also agreed conclusions endorsing a Commission report by the Commission on road transport telematics and inviting further work in this area.

The Council agreed conclusions welcoming a Commission communication on trans-European rail freight freeways, whose aim is to encourage the transfer of freight from road to rail by allowing greater freedom of access by train operators to the Community's rail network.

The Council reached political agreement on a Directive requiring counting of passengers on all sea voyages and the registration of the name, gender and other details of passengers on voyages over 20 miles, subject to certain exemptions and derogations. The Council also reached political agreement on a Directive bringing Community rules on seafarer training into line with the 1995 revision of International Maritime Organisation Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers.

The Council held a general debate on a Commission communication on maritime external relations, and agreed conclusions welcoming a Commission report on short sea shipping.

Among other issues raised at the Council were the growth of weekend lorry bans, the Community's aviation negotiations with the US and with central and Eastern European countries, and duty-free sales on travel within the European Union. On this a number of Member States sought an independent study of the effects of abolition: no undertaking was, however, given by the Commission.

Dial-a-Ride Schemes

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much in each of the last three financial years his Department has provided in financial support to London Transport for dial-a-ride schemes operating in London, and how much London Transport paid to the dial-a-ride companies in each of the same years. [4424]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The answer is as follows:

£million

	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Payments to London Transport for Dial-a-Ride	12.6	9.3	10.1
Payments by London Transport to the Dial-a-Ride companies	9.3	8.8	8.5

The difference between the two figures is London Transport's own salary and staff costs in support of Dial-a-Ride, and certain costs which London Transport met on behalf of the Dial-a-Ride companies such as vehicles and computer equipment.

M20

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will use the M20 between junctions 3 and 5 to test the new quieter road surfaces developed by his Department. [5136]

Ms Glenda Jackson: When the M20 between junctions 3 and 5 needs attention as part of planned maintenance, the possibility of using it to test novel forms of quieter road surface developed by the industry will be considered.

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide noise barriers on the M20 between junction 3 and 5. [5135]

Ms Jackson: It is not possible to justify the expenditure of public funds on providing noise barriers along this section of the M20. As this would mainly be of benefit to people who either bought property in the vicinity of the M20 in full knowledge of the noise from traffic, or were compensated for the loss of value of their property when the road was first built, in anticipation of the growth of traffic on it.

Noise Barriers

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will adopt a discretionary policy of providing noise barriers on motorways that were opened to traffic after 17 October 1969. [5134]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The current policy is aimed at reducing the adverse effects that road construction or improvement would have on the surrounding area and

applying similar principles to those roads which were built before the operative date specified in the Land Compensation Act.

Diesel Fuel (Pollution)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the impact on pollutant emissions of introducing a tax differential between diesel fuel products based on the level of pollution they generate. [4864]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Provision has been made for a duty differential of 1p per litre between ultra low sulphur diesel and conventional diesel fuel and this will be introduced when we have completed the procedure of obtaining the necessary EU derogation. This is imminent. It is expected that the effect of this differential on pollutant emissions will increase as supplies of ultra low sulphur diesel become more readily available. It is still too early to judge what the final impact of the existing differential might be.

Radioactive Materials (Transportation)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will assess the advantages of reconstituting the Advisory Committee on the Safe Transport of Radioactive Materials. [4911]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Advisory Committee on the Safe Transport of Radioactive Material (ACTRAM) was wound up in January 1989 after the Secretary of State for Transport and the Chairman of the Health and Safety Commission had agreed that its work had been satisfactorily completed. I am satisfied that ACTRAM's conclusions remain valid and that there is no need to reconstitute the Committee.

Motorway Lighting

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the stretches of motorway which are currently unlit; what his Department's policy is in relation to lighting these parts of the motorway; and if he will make a statement. [5079]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. Peter Pike, dated 25 June 1997:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your recent question about the sections of unlit motorway and the Department's policy for lighting these parts of motorway.

Road Lighting is provided over 30% of the motorway network in England. A list and a map illustrating the lit sections of motorway is attached for your information. Copies of the attached map will be placed in the Library. All other sections of motorway are currently unlit.

Lighting is provided in high accident risk areas. The decision on whether to provide lighting is based on an economic assessment of the capital, maintenance and energy costs set against the potential savings as a result of the reduction in night time personal injury accidents. A full environmental assessment is also incorporated.

New motorway lighting is being provided in conjunction with motorway widening schemes currently under construction. Apart from this, there is no programme to extend road lighting to unlit sections of motorway. The situation is however kept under review in light of historic accident rates and availability of funds.

List of whole or part sections of lit motorway

Motorway	*Junction to Junction*	
	Number	*Number*
M1	1	20
M1	21	27
M1	46	47
M2	6	End
M3	Start	1
M3	2	3
M3	12	End
M4	Start	8/9
M4	10	13
M4	20	21
M4	22	Wales
M5	Start	9
M5	14	19
M5	30	31
M6	Start	1
M6	2	3
M6	3	11
M6	15	16
M6	19	21A
M6	26	33
M10	1	2
M11	Start	3
M11	5	7
M11	12	End
M20	4	8
M20	11	13
M23	7	9
M23	9	9A
M23	10	End
M25	1A	3
M25	6	9
M25	10	17
M25	18	22
M25	23	31
M27	3	4
M27	5	9
M27	11	12
M32	Start	1
M32	1	3
M40	1	2
M40	4	5
M42	Start	1
M42	3	4
M42	5	9
M45	Start	1
M50	Start	1
M53	Start	3
M54	Start	3
M55	Start	3
M55	3	End
M56	Start	7
M57	6	End
M58	Start	1
M58	3	4
M61	Start	4
M61	9	End
M62	9	11
M62	11	27
M62	37	End
M63	Start	End
M66	1	End
M67	Start	End
M69	Start	1
M69	2	End
M180	Start	2
M180	4	End
M606	Start	End
M621	Start	End

Details based on fully commissioned lighting installations.

Fuel Duty

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received against the abolition of vehicle excise duty and the replacement of the lost revenue by the introduction of an additional fuel duty. [5382]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Representation has been received from a range of individuals and organisations on vehicle and fuel taxation, including the suggestion of abolishing vehicle excise duty and increasing fuel duty.

Port of Tyne

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received about the privatisation of the Port of Tyne; and if he will make a statement. [5257]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My right hon. Friend is currently considering a request from the Port of Tyne Authority that the compulsory privatisation of the port should not proceed. Six other letters about the port have also been received.

River Cruise Licences

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will consider renegotiating river cruise licences with a view to safety. [4022]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This is not a question which necessarily falls to my Department as the description of "river cruise licences" does not conform to any particular licence or certificate which is currently issued.

Local authorities issue licences allowing the operation of vessels which carry passengers and these licences would seem to be the most similar to those referred to in the question. There is an administrative charge relating to such licences and limited safety implications are involved.

The Marine Safety Agency (MSA) is responsible for issuing Passenger Certificates to vessels operating on inland waterways and the Environment Agency (EA) formally the National Rivers Authority (NRA) operates a Boat Safety Scheme with the emphasis for both being safety.

If you have any questions relating to either of these areas, I am sure that the Chief Executives of the MSA or EA will be able to help.

War Pensioners

Mr. Richard Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for a national scheme of disregards for war pensioners in respect of council tax and housing benefit to replace the current local discretionary schemes. [4128]

Mr. Bradley: I have been asked to reply.

The present disregard aims to strike a balance between acknowledging the special reasons for payment of the pension and the proper use of public funds. War pensioners already receive preferential treatment and benefit from many advantages over their Social Security counterparts.

To increase the disregard of the special treatment already afforded to war pensioners and war widows could be done only at the expense of other deserving groups.

We therefore have no plans to change the current disregards for war pensioners.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Chartered Accountants

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what visitorial rights he has in respect of disputes between the officials of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and its members. [5391]

Mr. Hoon: I have none. Her Majesty The Queen has directed the Lord Chancellor to exercise Her visitorial jurisdiction in connection with one dispute involving the Association.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Cranston: To ask the Attorney-General what progress has been made on the appointment of an organisational expert as part of the Crown Prosecution Service review. [5795]

The Attorney-General: I have appointed Mr. Robert McFarland, formerly Chief Executive of BOC Gases (South Asia, Middle East and Africa). He is a Chartered Accountant who has recently completed a successful international career in industry and will bring considerable organisational/management expertise to the Review team.

CABINET OFFICE

Minister without Portfolio

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Minister without Portfolio if he will list the *(a)* meetings and *(b)* telephone conversations he has held since 2 May in his official capacity with members of the media, and the subjects discussed. [5417]

Mr. Mandelson: No.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Post Office

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will extend the complaint and redress provisions of the citizens charter to the Post Office.[4989]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Both Royal Mail and Post Office Counters Ltd. already produce documents under the Charter which set out what customers can expect when they use the Post Office's services and what to do if something goes wrong, including details of available compensation. We are, however, committed to

re-launching the programme of charters and, in this context, officials will be meeting the Post Office next month.

Departmental Salaries

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will publish a list of those persons who were not established civil servants on 2 May whose salaries are currently being paid by his Departments, identifying the current salaries and position held by each of these persons and giving a summary of their provisions careers. [5420]

Dr. David Clark: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) on 6 June 1997, *Official Report*, columns *262–63*.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Women in Sport

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what proposals he has to increase the involvement of women in traditionally male-dominated sports; and if he will make a statement. [2709]

Mr. Banks: The Government is keen to improve opportunities for women at all levels in sport, whether as participants, competitors, coaches or administrators.

The four Home Country Sports Councils, which are funded by central Government, actively encourage the involvement of women in all sports. Other sporting agencies, such as the Womens Sports Foundation are also doing much to underline the significant achievement of women in sport and help improve levels of participation.

Organisations are required to include ways of encouraging the participation of women when applying for monies from the National Lottery Sports Fund. This is helping to increase participation levels, particularly in those sports that have traditionally been male-dominated. These sports will be carefully monitored to ensure that the increased access is delivered.

The Government will explore ways to build on this and further extend opportunities through a national strategy for sport which will embrace all sections of the community regardless of where they live, social background, age or ability.

Millennium Events

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has for supporting Millennium events in the regions. [3210]

Mr. Chris Smith: It is the Government's intention to support Millennium events throughout the UK through the Millennium Commission. In announcing his support for the Millennium Exhibition on 19 June the Prime Minister said that the Exhibition must be a truly national event, with links across the whole of the UK.

The addition to the Exhibition in Greenwich the Millennium Commission has to date awarded grants totalling £994 million to 112 capital projects on 2,036 sites across the UK. These range from landmark projects, such as the Lowry Centre in Salford, to small local projects. The Commission is also funding a number of nationwide umbrella projects, such as "Woods on your doorstep" and "21st Century Halls".

Playing Fields

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how many acres of school playing fields have been sold off in the last 10 years; and what is the policy of the Government towards the sale of *(a)* playing fields and *(b)* school playing fields. [3189]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer Monday 23 June 1997]:* Local Education Authorities are not required to report their disposals of playing fields to Central Government and consequently no central record of playing field sales exist. Provided their schools continue to comply with the requirements for minimum playing field area in the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1996, Local Education Authorities may dispose of land belonging to them without reference to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

The Government intends to make sure that those playing fields which schools and their local communities need are not sold in the future. The Government is considering, urgently, a wide range of options to ensure that all school pupils and communities will have access to proper sports facilities.

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the selling of playing fields. [5386]

Mr. Banks: The Government intends to make sure that those playing fields which schools and their local communities need are not sold in the future. The Government is considering, urgently, a wide range of options to ensure that all school pupils and communities will have access to proper sports facilities.

Tourist Accommodation (Bed Space)

Mr. Butterfill: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what action he proposes to take to ensure the registration of all businesses supplying bed spaces for tourists; and if he will make a statement.[5138]

Mr. Tom Clarke: The Government is determined to see improvements in accommodation standards. The AA, RAC and ETB announced in February plans for a new harmonised scheme which for the first time would give a single rating for hotels according to both the quality of their service and the facilities they offer. They will be consulting the industry on the details of this and on a scheme covering non-hotel accommodation such as guest-houses, B and Bs, farmhouses and inns. The introduction of these voluntary measures will be an important first step in raising standards.

Sign Language

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to introduce secondary legislation to increase the minimum requirement for sign language on digital terrestrial television. [4777]

Mr. Fisher: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has no current plans to use the powers in the Broadcasting Act 1996 to amend the minimum requirements for sign language on digital terrestrial television. The Government will, however, monitor this issue closely taking into account, in particular, any technological advances which would make on screen signing easier for the broadcasters to provide. The Independent Television Commission has undertaken that it will regularly review all aspects of its Code on Subtitling, Sign Language and Audio Description on Digital Terrestrial Television. The Government welcomes this and will maintain close liaison with the Commission.

Kick Boxing

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will make a statement about his Department's policy towards kick boxing. [4086]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer Monday 23 June 1997]:* The Government does not regulate kick boxing—or indeed any other sport in this country. This is a matter for the relevant governing body, or bodies, acting within the bounds of the law. However, I believe that those in charge of such sports have a duty to ensure they are conducted safely, particularly where there is a risk of injury, and that governing bodies of sport should have the appropriate medical and safety regulations in place. The tragic death of Sean McBride, following his participation in a kick boxing bout in Northern Ireland, highlights the need for governing bodies to take urgent and appropriate action.

Tobacco Companies (Sponsorship)

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage, pursuant to his answer of 19 May, *Official Report*, column *361*, if he will list the alternative sponsors he has identified to replace existing funding provided by tobacco companies for each sport in the event of the proposed ban on tobacco sponsorship of sport. [4289]

Mr. Banks: I will be looking very carefully at how best to achieve an end to the advertising and promotion of tobacco at sports events in a way that will minimise any damage to the sports concerned. Clearly we will do all we can to help the sports concerned identify alternative sponsors.

Tourism Industry

Mr. Butterfill: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what assessment he has made of the effect of VAT and the VAT threshold on the international competitiveness of the British tourism industry. [5137]

Mr. Tom Clarke: Issues concerning VAT and the VAT threshold are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I am aware of the tourism industry's concerns about VAT-related issues, as is he.

TREASURY

National Savings Accommodation Review

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to receive the results of the National Savings Accommodation Review. [3370]

Mrs. Liddell: The review of National Savings, future accommodation needs has now been subsumed into the exploration of a possible Private Finance Initiative (PFI) project. A shortlist of three property firms are being consulted, and the Agency hopes to issue an Invitation to Negotiate next month.

European Single Currency

Ms Kelly: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in what respects the Bank of England would need to be reformed to meet all the requirements for central bank independence in the Maastricht treaty; and when legislation would need to be passed if the United Kingdom wished to join a European single currency at the beginning of 1999. [4243]

Mrs. Liddell: The proposed changes to the Bank of England will not make it compatible with the requirements in the EC Treaty which would apply if the United Kingdom were to adopt the single currency. In particular, the Governor would need to be fully independent when carrying out his tasks in the Governing Council of the European Central Bank, and the Bank of England would need to be able to play a full role in the European System of Central Banks and the formulation and implementation of the single monetary policy.

The Treaty provides for the ECB to take responsibility for the monetary policy of the single currency on 1 January 1999. The legislative framework enabling the Bank of England to play its part would need to be in place by 1 January 1999 at the latest if the United Kingdom were to adopt the single currency. Progress towards making the Bank of England compatible with the Treaty will be assessed by the Commission and the European Monetary Institute as part of their reports made in accordance with the procedure under Article 109j(1) of the Treaty probably in spring 1998.

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) in whose name the deeds for the gold reserves for the Euro will be held; [4463]

(2) what action would be taken against a participant in the single currency which was found to have gold reserves less than its planned contribution to the central reserves; [4461]

(3) where the gold reserves for the Euro will be held; [4464]

(4) what estimate he has made of the quantity of gold and foreign currency reserves which this country would contribute to the Euro's central reserves in the event of participation in the single currency. [4462]

Mrs. Liddell: The foreign reserve assets to be held and managed by the European Central Bank (ECB) will be provided by the national central banks of countries which adopt the single currency in accordance with Article 30 of the Statute of the European System of Central Banks (ESCB) annexed to the EC Treaty. The amount to be

provided by each national central bank will depend on the size of its country's population and national income. It is not possible at this stage to say precisely how much the Bank of England would need to provide if the United Kingdom were to join. The amount required in total by the ECB and its precise composition will be decided by its Governing Council, within a ceiling provided by the Treaty.

Foreign reserve assets held and managed by the ECB will be "pooled", in the sense that the central banks which provide them will have in turn a proportionate claim on the assets of the ECB. The Governing Council will decide the degree of decentralisation of the activities of the ESCB. There are likely to be good reasons for some or all foreign reserve assets to remain in individual national central banks, so that they can be used more effectively in local financial markets for example.

The Treaty provides no mechanism or sanction specifically for use against a national central bank which fails to provide the required amount of foreign reserve assets.

Unemployment Benefit (Portsmouth)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people aged 17 to 25 years were claiming unemployment benefit in Portsmouth in June of *(a)* 1974, *(b)* 1979, *(c)* 1988, *(d)* 1992, *(e)* 1993, *(f)* 1994, *(g)* 1995 and *(h)* 1996; and what percentage of the total number of those in this age group these figures represent. [4743]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Michael Hancock, dated 25 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on the numbers of 17 to 25 year olds claiming unemployment benefit in Portsmouth in June of (a) 1974, (b) 1979, (c) 1988, (d) 1992, (e) 1993, (f) 1994, (g) 1995 and (h) 1996; and what percentage of the total number of those in this age group these figures represent.

The data you have requested can only be derived from the monthly count of people claiming unemployment-related benefits (i.e. Unemployment Benefit and Income Support which were replaced by Jobseeker's Allowance in October 1996, or National Insurance credits). Essentially, all people who attend an Employment Service office to sign on the designated day are counted.

These figures by broad age group for Local Authority Districts have been available quarterly since 1983. The corresponding figures by age are only available quarterly and not seasonally adjusted, and are based on particular age bands. The data given in the attached table, relating to claimants aged 17 to 24 inclusive in July each year, correspond as closely as possible to your request.

Portsmouth authority district

	Claimant unemployed aged 17–24	*Resident population aged 17–24*[1]	*Claimant unemployed aged 17–24 as a percentage of population*
July 1988	2,300	31,400	7.3
July 1992	3,200	28,300	11.2
July 1993	3,300	26,400	12.6
July 1994	2,700	25,600	10.7
July 1995	2,500	25,600	9.9
July 1996	2,300	n/a	[2]8.9

[1] Mid-year estimates.
[2] Provisional (based on mid-1995 population estimates).

Unemployment

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people aged 18 to 24 years have come off unemployment benefits in each of the past five years; and what were the alternative activities to which they moved. [4995]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. David Willetts, dated 25 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on how many people aged 18 to 24 years have come off unemployment benefits in each of the past five years; and what were the alternative activities to which they moved.

Total numbers leaving the claimant count from 1992 to 1996 are shown in the attached tables 1 to 3 but information on the destination of leavers from the claimant count is not available for 1992 to 1994.

For 1995 and 1996, numbers of leavers from the claimant count are shown in tables 2 and 3 according to the claim end reason categories identified in those years. The percentages shown in these tables are expressed in terms of leavers with a known destination.

Table 1: Total number of leavers from the claimant count, aged 18–24 years, United Kingdom 1992 to 1994

Year	*Total leavers (000s)*
1992	1,407.4
1993	1,423.2
1994	1,390.5

Source:
NOMIS.

Table 2: Reasons for claim termination for claimants aged 18–24 years, United Kingdom 1995

Reason for leaving	*Leaver (000s)*	*As a percentage of those with known destination*
Ceased claiming	27.1	3.0
Found work	687.5	75.0
Gone abroad	24.1	2.6
Claimed another benefit	24.6	2.7
Full-time education	35.9	3.9
Claimant deceased	0.2	0.0
Approved training	2.8	0.3
Claimed sickness benefit	48.7	5.3

Table 2: Reasons for claim termination for claimants aged 18–24 years, United Kingdom 1995

Reason for leaving	*Leaver (000s)*	*As a percentage of those with known destination*
Transferred to government-supported training	65.4	7.1
Total known destination	916.4	100.0
Not known	9.6	—
Failed to attend	387.4	—
Total leavers	1,313.5	—

Source:
JUVOS Leaving Marker.

Table 3: Reasons for claim termination for claimants aged 18–24 years, United Kingdom 1996

Reason for leaving	*Leavers (000s)*	*As a percentage of those with a known destination*
Ceased claiming	24.5	2.9
Found work	637.1	76.0
Gone abroad	19.6	2.3
Claimed another benefit	23.5	2.8
Full-time education	28.9	3.5
Claimant deceased	0.2	0.0
Approved training	1.2	0.1
Claimed sickness benefit	42.5	5.1
Transferred to government-supported training	55.5	6.6
Working on average 16+ hours	3.4	0.4
Claimed Incapacity Support	0.8	0.1
Claimed Income Support	0.2	0.0
Defective claim	0.4	0.1
Claimant in prison	0.1	0.0
Total known destination	838.1	100.0
Not known	12.8	—
Failed to attend	359	—
Total leavers	1,209.9	—

Source:
JUVOS Leaving Marker.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many persons aged 18 to 24 years in the Colchester parliamentary constituency who are currently registered unemployed have never been employed. [5003]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tom Holt to Mr. Bob Russell, dated 25 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question asking how many persons aged 18 to 24 years in the Colchester parliamentary constituency who are currently unemployed have been employed.

The only source which provides information about whether or not a person has ever been employed (other than in casual and holiday jobs) is the Labour Force Survey. Because this is a sample survey no information is available below county level.

Labour Statistics

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of households *(a)* in each region and *(b)* in total have no one in full-time employment; and if he will make a statement. [4854]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 24 June 1997]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tom Holt to Mr. Lembit Öpik, dated 25 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on what percentage of households have no one in full-time employment.

Estimates available from the Labour Force Survey for non-pensioner households are shown in the attached table using the new Government Office Region (GOR) geography.

It is widely accepted that analyses of households with no one in employment or, in this case, no one in full-time employment, should exclude pensioner households. This area of analysis is relatively new for the LFS and the definition of non-pensioner or working age households is not yet firmly established. The table provided is based on the same definition of non-pensioner household as previous responses to parliamentary questions to this topic. The ONS has been assessing the various alternative definitions and expects to publish its recommendations in the September issue of Labour Market Trends.

Non-pensioner households with no one in full-time employment, not seasonally adjusted, winter 1996–97

Region	*Per cent.*
United Kingdom	24.8
Great Britain	24.8
England	24.3
North-east	31.2
North-west and Merseyside	27.8
North-west	26.5
Merseyside	33.3
Yorkshire and Humberside	26.2
East Midlands	21.7
West Midlands	23.9
Eastern	20.3
London	29.2
South-east	18.0
South-west	22.3
Wales	29.1
Scotland	27.1
Northern Ireland	27.3

Source:
Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics.

Debt Relief

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the economic reform programmes agreed between low-income countries and the IMF as a condition for debt relief; what plans he has to press for a review of these requirements; and if will make a statement. [3877]

Mrs. Liddell: It is essential that countries which benefit from debt relief should have a track record of economic reform, and a commitment to continue with

sound economic policies, as part of a wider commitment by debtors to balanced transparent economic reform programmes which encourage economic and social development and thus create the conditions in which poverty can be alleviated. We review the suitability of each country's proposed economic reform programme as a prerequisite for debt relief prior to participating in decisions on each case.

Windfall Tax

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the windfall tax will be a one-off levy. [5656]

Mr. Gordon Brown: As I explained to the House, the legislation will be for a one-off levy. The intention is that the legislation will enact this financial year, in one Bill and will not form a recurring part of the legislative programme.

Expenditure Control

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has for improving co-operation between the European Commission and Government Departments in the United Kingdom in the control of expenditure by United Kingdom Government Departments which is financed by the EC Budget. [5655]

Mrs. Liddell: I am very pleased to announce that agreement has been reached between the European Commission and the Government on the signature of Protocols between the Financial Controller of the European Commission and the Accounting Officer and Heads of Internal Audit of UK Departments with responsibilities for Structural Fund expenditure. These Protocols provide for an enhanced level of co-operation between the Commission's Financial Control and the Internal Audit Units of UK Departments in the control and auditing of Structural Fund expenditure. This will lead to a better use of the resources available for this purpose, agreement on common standards, and the exchange of relevant reports, without prejudicing the independence or statutory responsibilities of either party.

This is an important contribution to the improvement of the Community's financial management systems within the context of the Commission's strategy for improving and modernising financial management, Sound and Efficiency Management (SEM) 2000, which the Government strongly supports. Similar Protocols have already been agreed between the Commission and a number of other Member States, and I understand that discussions are under way between the Commission and further Member States.

Child Cash Allowance

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to announce changes in the level of the child cash allowance for under 16s. [3965]

Mr. Bradley: I have been asked to reply.

Modernising the Social Security system to reduce poverty and strengthen family life is one of our key priorities. We are committed to retaining universal Child Benefit from birth to age 16, and to uprate it at least in line with prices. The rates of Child Benefit are reviewed and announced annually.

HEALTH

St. Bartholomew's Hospital

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place an immediate moratorium on the downgrading, reduction and loss of services provided by St. Bartholomew's hospital. [3040]

Mr. Milburn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 20 June 1997 the establishment of a review of London's health services to be conducted by an independent advisory panel chaired by Sir Leslie Turnberg, President of the Royal College of Physicians. During the review there is a moratorium on all hospital closures in London. The review panel will be advising in particular on the future of St. Bartholomew's hospital.

Hospitals (Capital Charges)

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the calculation and implementation of capital charges on hospitals will be included in his review of the funding of the NHS. [4899]

Mr. Milburn: The comprehensive spending review announced on 11 June will look at all areas of spending. The Government's election manifesto made clear our commitment to a national health service based on need not on ability to pay. Every aspect of the Department of Health's comprehensive spending review will be judged against that commitment.

Devonshire Royal Hospital, Buxton

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are the terms of reference of the current review of the Devonshire Royal hospital, Buxton, currently being carried out by NHS Estates, Leeds. [4900]

Mr. Milburn: The terms of reference for the review of the Devonshire Royal hospital, Buxton are:

to explore, with English Heritage, the possibility that the Devonshire Royal hospital be transferred to a heritage trust, and if so what arrangements would need to be put in place, and if this would enable the building to remain in continued National Health Service use; and

to explore, with English Heritage and the local planning authority, what alternative uses the Devonshire Royal hospital might be put to if it becomes surplus to NHS requirements, and if early steps can be taken to identify a purchaser.

Vaccines

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what arrangements exist for the long-term safety monitoring of MMR vaccines. [4920]

Ms Jowell: Before measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination was introduced into the United Kingdom immunisation programme in 1988, there was extensive experience of its use in many other industrialised countries. The United States had been using MMR routinely since the early 1970s and around 100 million doses have been administered. By the time a two dose programme was introduced in the UK, in 1996, there was extensive experience of two dose programmes in many other countries. For example, a two dose programme of MMR in place in Finland since 1982 has

led to the elimination of these diseases from that country. The vaccine was reported to have an excellent safety record.

In the UK the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) collects information from many different sources to monitor the safety of all medicines, including vaccines, in clinical practice worldwide. Spontaneous reports of suspected adverse drug reactions are submitted to the Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM) and MCA by doctors, pharmacists, coroners and dentists under the voluntary 'yellow card' scheme in the UK. There is a statutory requirement for pharmaceutical companies to report reactions to their products on a world-wide basis. Companies also provide regular safety updates for their products to the MCA. The number and pattern of suspected adverse reactions reports from all data sources are regularly reviewed, and appropriate action initiated if there is any indication of a safety hazard. The safety of vaccines is carefully monitored both by the CSM and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation which advise UK Health Ministers.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on progress made in work, funded by his Department, by the Public Health Laboratory Service in respect of vaccine safety. [4924]

Ms Jowell: The Public Health Laboratory Service is investigating adverse events associated with immunisation in children under two years of age, using hospital admissions data and child health immunisation records. Pilot studies in single districts have been published and copies of this paper have been placed in the Library. Their latest work, using regional data, will shortly be submitted for publication. Unfortunately, the results from studies using general practitioners' records do not so far suggest that this will be a useful source of data for identifying adverse reactions to vaccines.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will set out the criteria used for the testing of vaccines for immunogenicity and reactogenicity; what discussions his Department has had with the National Institute for Biological Standards and Control over the product licensing of vaccines; and when he next plans to meet the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to discuss the administration of the MMR vaccine. [4921]

Ms Jowell: Before a new vaccine is licensed in the United Kingdom all of the information on its safety, quality and efficacy is evaluated by the Government's Medicines Control Agency and by the Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM), an independent advisory committee. For a vaccine this will include assessment of clinical trials investigating the immunogenicity and reactogenicity of the product. There are no specific criteria laid out for the clinical testing of vaccines and each application for licensing by the MCA is taken on a case by case basis, depending on the type of vaccine.

The National Institute for Biological Standards and Control (NIBSC), as a European Official Medicines Control Laboratory, carries out the batch release testing for certain biologicals, including vaccines, which is required as a condition of the European or United Kingdom licence granted for the product in question. Such testing is aimed at assessing the purity and potency of each batch of the product against specifications defined in the product licence. NIBSC also reviews manufacturing protocols as part of the evaluation of batch release. NIBSC also provides expert advice on vaccines and some of its staff are members of the biologicals sub-committee of the Committee on Safety of Medicines. The Director of the NIBSC is a member of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI); any concerns NIBSC may have would be brought to the attention of that committee.

We have no plans to meet the JCVI but, as with all vaccines, the JCVI will keep the benefits and risks of MMR vaccination under review. We have asked to be kept informed of any developments.

NHS Trusts (Colchester)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to meet the chairman of the NHS trusts in the Colchester area to discuss the state of the trust's finances. [5002]

Mr. Milburn: We have no plans for a meeting, but Ministers are visiting many national health service organisations and meeting many people involved in the service, and this may well include the chairmen of trusts in the Colchester area. We are aware of the financial position of trusts, which is monitored by the National Health Service Executive.

Mr. Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to make the membership of NHS trusts in the Colchester area more representative and publicly accountable. [5004]

Mr. Milburn: We are introducing a range of measures in the coming weeks to ensure that appointments to the boards of both national health service trusts and health authorities are more democratic and representative of the communities that they serve.

Medicines (Costs)

Ms Hodge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the average cost of medicines prescribed per treatment to the NHS in each of the last 10 years. [5075]

Mr. Milburn: The available information is shown in the table.

The average net ingredient cost per prescription for items dispensed, 1986 to 1996

England

Year	*Average net ingredient cost per prescription item (£)*	
	Actual	*At 1996 prices*
1986	4.21	6.66
1987	4.55	6.84
1988	4.97	7.00
1989	5.29	6.97
1990	5.68	6.93
1991 (a)	6.08	6.98
1991 (b)	6.20	7.11
1992	6.72	7.40
1993	7.09	7.58
1994	7.47	7.85

The average net ingredient cost per prescription for items dispensed, 1986 to 1996

England

Year	*Average net ingredient cost per prescription item (£)*	
	Actual	*At 1996 prices*
1995	7.78	7.97
1996	8.26	8.26

1. 1986 to 1991 (a) data are from the PD1 series of forms and based on fees. They cover prescriptions dispensed by community pharmacists and appliance contractors, dispensing doctors, and personal administration.
2. 1991 (b) to 1996 data are from the new Prescription Cost Analysis [PCA] system based on items and have the same coverage as Note 1 above.
3. The net ingredient cost refers to the cost of the drug before discounts and does not include any dispensing costs or fees.
4. Figures at 1996 prices are calculated using the GDP Deflator.

Medicines Act (Disclosure of Data)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to amend section 118 of the Medicines Act 1968 to permit wider disclosure of data submitted by pharmaceutical companies to the licensing authority. [4923]

Mr. Milburn: We have no current plans to amend section 118 of the Medicines Act. However, in the light of the forthcoming White Paper on Freedom of Information, we will consider what further steps are necessary to maximise public access to information about their medicines whilst safeguarding genuine commercial confidentiality.

Alcohol Consumption

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how he intends to achieve the "The Health of the Nation" targets to reduce the percentage of women drinking more than 14 units of alcohol a week. [5322]

Ms Jowell: The proportion of women drinking above the previously recommended sensible levels has increased over the last 10 years. It is a trend that is reflected throughout most of Europe which is strongly related to women's changing socioeconomic status.

We are funding a project at the University of Birmingham on why people drink more than recommended sensible levels. This will inform future policy and health education campaigns. Activities targeting women have been encouraged at local level through the Health Education Authority. In addition, a successful new health promotion booklet was launched last year aimed at women over 35 in the lower socioeconomic groups; the booklet includes advice on sensible drinking.

We are considering possible ways of revising alcohol targets for women which reflect the advice in the 1995 inter-departmental report "Sensible Drinking".

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the costs to the national health service of the abuse of alcohol. [5173]

Ms Jowell: Estimates of alcohol-related morbidity and mortality vary widely; the most recent academic estimate of which we are aware is reproduced in the table.

	£ million
Psychiatric hospitals, inpatient costs	26.51
Non-psychiatric hospitals, inpatient costs	10.64
Other alcohol-related inpatient costs	109.41
General practice costs	2.79
Total	149.35

Source: Health Education Authority: Health Update 3: Alcohol (1993)—after Godfrey, C. (1992).

Resource Allocations

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the allocation of resources to health authorities will be based on a wholly-weighted formula from 1998–99. [5286]

Mr. Milburn: We are committed to an objective, needs-based approach to resource allocation. We are investigating the possibility of introducing further refinements to the weighted capitation formula in time for 1998–99 allocations.

Eye Tests

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the cost benefit analysis of reintroducing free eye tests with particular reference to people aged 60 years and over; [4425]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 10 June to the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock), *Official Report*, column *421*, on eye tests, what will be the terms of reference for the review of eye tests charges; what is its expected timetable; and if it will include an examination of the costs to other Departments of the reported increase in intervals between eye tests. [4427]

Mr. Milburn: We have yet to decide the terms of reference and timing of the review. No research has yet been commissioned.

Children in Care

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to provide every child in residential care with an independent visitor; and what is the expected timetable for implementation of this policy. [4773]

Mr. Boateng: Local authorities have a statutory duty to appoint an independent visitor for any child they are looking after if they believe that it would be in the child's best interest and communication between the child and his parents is infrequent.

A report is expected this summer from Sir William Utting on safeguards for children living away from home, including those in residential care. Government will consider any recommendations arising from the report on the need to extend the role of the independent visitor to all children in residential care.

EU Citizens (Residence Test)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if European Union citizens who have failed the habitual

residence test and are being denied social security benefits will become the responsibility of social service authorities. [4426]

Mr. Boateng: It is for each local authority to determine in any particular case, and taking into account all relevant information, whether a person is in need of community care services and whether such services should be provided.

Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the legal costs to date incurred by his Department and the Treasury Solicitor acting on behalf of the Medical Research Council, indicating separately disbursements and counsel fees, of the defence from claims brought against his Department and the Medical Research Council in respect of Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease litigation. [5111]

Ms Jowell: Identifiable legal costs to the Department of Health to date are approximately £500,000. These figures do not include the legal costs of the plaintiffs who were successful in their legal action in April–May 1996, since claims have not been received. Counsel costs are £320,000 and disbursements are £130,000.

In addition, numerous staff at various levels and for various periods of time have been involved in matters related to the litigation and their costs cannot be separately identified.

For the details of the costs incurred by the Treasury Solicitor on behalf of the Medical Research Council, I refer my hon. Friend to my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Fishing Quota

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the estimated total purchase price at current market value of all fishing vessels in non-United Kingdom ownership eligible to catch fish under the fishing quota allocated to the United Kingdom. [4723]

Mr. Morley: The Department does not hold this information.

Genedically Modified Food

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans his Department has to regulate the supply of genetically modified food. [5087]

Mr. Rooker: The EC novel foods and novel food ingredients regulation 258/97, which came into force on 15 May, lays down an EU wide pre-market approval system and labelling requirements for novel foods and novel food ingredients including those containing, or produced from, genetically modified organisms (GMOs). All applications for approval will be considered by the UK's independent Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minster of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what studies he has authorised into the consumer safety aspects of genetically modified maize. [5167]

Mr. Rooker: While no specific studies have been commissioned on genetically modified (GM) maize, the Department is currently spending around £1 million a year on work to underpin the safety assessments undertaken by the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes on GM materials such as this.

Internet

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what use he plans to make of the Internet to make Government more open. [5105]

Mr. Morley: MAFF takes a positive view of the Internet as a medium for making its work more open and accessible. The introduction of a dedicated MAFF World Wide Web service (http://www.maff.gov.uk) in October 1996 has seen an expansion in the range of information available to Internet users. The Department is considering how to further develop electronic services to the public.

Regional Panels

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what mechanisms for consultation with farmers he intends to introduce to replace the MAFF regional panels. [4925]

Mr. Rooker: We have arrangements for consulting formally with a wide range of interests, including farmers, about a wide range of issues. These will continue. Ministers have begun a new system of regular regional consultations with a wider representation of those involved in the countryside, including farmers, consumers, environmentalists, and from the food industry. Ministers will also be available and accessible to those who use, live and work in the countryside on their regular regional visits.

Horticulture

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to promote horticulture; and if he will make a statement. [4877]

Mr. Rooker: The Government is determined to see a flourishing horticulture industry in the United Kingdom. We will therefore be spending some £12.7 million in 1997–98 under our research programme, directed at improving the competitiveness and market responsiveness of the sector. Priority areas are those showing the greatest potential for growth and added value, especially where there is a clear trade gap opportunity such as extending our own growing seasons.

The financial assistance available to recognised producer groups under the reformed regime for fresh fruit and vegetables will also enable growers in the sector to improve their competitive edge. We are seeking to ensure that growers in the UK benefit fully from EU funds available under these new arrangements.

Antibiotics (Livestock Production)

Mr. Martyn Jones: to ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will establish a comprehensive review of the issues relating to the use of antibiotics in livestock production. [4879]

Mr. Rooker: The use of antibiotics in livestock production is kept under review. The independent scientific Veterinary Products Committee (VPC) advises the government on the safety, quality and efficacy of veterinary medicines and medicinal feed additives, including the possible development of antibiotic resistance in humans. The Advisory Committee on Microbiological Safety of Food has set up a Working Group to examine the issues of antibiotic resistance, including the possible effects of the use of veterinary products. The Working Group is due to report its findings by the end of 1997.

A European Commission expert Working Group is preparing a monitoring programme, and the Committee for Veterinary Medicinal Products, the European body responsible for scientific advice on veterinary medicinal products, has set up an ad hoc group to investigate the current status of antimicrobial resistance in animals and the potential for its transfer to man.

Forestry Commission Land

Mr. John Cryer: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to halt the sale of Forestry Commission land in England; and if he will make a statement. [5223]

Mr. Morley: Our election manifesto stated that we favoured a moratorium on the large-scale sale of Forestry Commission land. Sales of all Commission land have been halted since the election was called.

Countryside Stewardship Scheme

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his plans for the countryside stewardship scheme. [5185]

Mr. Morley: Countryside Stewardship is the main environmental land management scheme providing incentives for farmers and land managers in England outside the Environmentally Sensitive Areas. It provides a very important mechanism for helping to fulfil our Biodiversity Strategy commitments as well as offering benefits for landscape, history and public enjoyment of the countryside.

The scheme will continue to expand with £5 million available for approval of new agreements in 1997–98 and a further £5 million 1998–99 when the total annual expenditure on the scheme will have risen to £21 million.

In addition we now propose a further expansion of the scheme. We wish to test a series of new options to enhance bio-diversity of arable areas through the introduction of a pilot scheme in 1998 to be called Arable Stewardship. One of the two proposed pilot areas is in the south Cambridgeshire/Suffolk area with the other being in the West Midlands.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the potential implications of the release of genetically modified organisms into the environment; and if he will make a statement. [5300]

Mr. Rooker: *(a)* MAFF has commissioned new research on possible risks to the agricultural environment from the release of herbicide tolerant crops. The research, with a total budget of over £500,000, will start this year and the results will be available from about 2000.

(b) MAFF began a programme of research to look at the possible risks to the agricultural environment from the release of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in 1990. Over £3.5 million has been committed to the programme and to date, results have not indicated any risks to the agricultural environment from the release of GMOs.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans his Department has to increase levels of surveillance for scrapie in sheep; and if he will make a statement. [4492]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 24 June 1997]:* SEAC reviewed the options for scrapie surveillance and in their advice to Government on 23 May recommended a three part strategy consisting of (1) a survey of sheeps' brains from abattoirs, (2) a postal survey of farmers, (3) introduction of compulsory slaughter measures together with compensation and powers to conduct veterinary investigation of cases of scrapie.

The Government intends to implement these recommendations. The first survey has been commissioned with the Veterinary Laboratory Agency, Weybridge and a number of approaches are being examined by MAFF to take forward the second. Work for this survey will be commissioned shortly. The Agriculture Departments are consulting interested parties on the draft measures for the compulsory slaughter and compensation scheme.

Scrapie

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many cases of scrapie have been recorded in each of the last five years; [4493]

(2) what assessment his Department had made of the reported number of scrapie cases in sheep prior to his commitment to compensate affected farmers; and if he will make a statement. [4495]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 24 June 1997]:* Scrapie became a notifiable disease on 1 January 1993. The confirmed cases in Great Britain year by year since the disease became notifiable were:

Year	*Number*
1993	328
1994	235
1995	254
1996	453
1997[1] (until end May)	213

[1] Until end May.

The Government's independent advisory committee, SEAC, has concluded that there is a probably a problem

with under-reporting. Other countries face similar problems with this disease. The French Government has recently introduced compulsory slaughter and compensation measures, similar to our own proposals. It is likely that the increase in notifications in Great Britain over the last 18 months has been due to payments being made to farmers by research workers for material from scrapie affected sheep, as in the early 1990s when a research project in force led to a number of cases brought to the attention of the authorities, though at that time the disease was not notifiable.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what date his Department plans to introduce compensation for farmers whose sheep are suspected of having scrapie; and if he will make a statement. [4494]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 24 June 1997]:* Agriculture Departments are consulting interested parties on draft measures for the Compulsory Slaughter and Compensation Scheme for sheep and goats affected by Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSEs). The consultation period ends on 30 June and we will then carefully consider all the comments received.

Quarantine

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 11 June, *Official Report*, column *508*, what representations he has received concerning the benefits of reforming current quarantine legislation; and if he will make a statement. [4808]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 24 June 1997]:* Since 2 May, the Department has received 326 letters on this subject. The great majority are in favour of changing existing rabies control policy.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 11 June, *Official Report*, column *508*, what plans he has to produce a consultative document on quarantine reform; and if he will make a statement. [4807]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 24 June 1997]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend, the Minister, to the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) on 19 June, *Official Report*, column *288*.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 11 June, *Official Report*, column *508*, what plans he has to meet organisations campaigning for reforms to quarantine legislation, to discuss alternatives to the current system; and if he will make a statement. [4809]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 24 June 1997]:* I will be meeting the RSPCA and Passports for Pets on Thursday 3 July.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Qualified Majority Voting

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to what extent measures affecting the United Kingdom's energy *(a)* sources and *(b)* supply will be subject to the qualified majority vote of all the members of the European Union. [5285]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Article 130s (2), which covers energy sources and supply, will remain subject to unanimity.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to what extent qualified majority voting over regional policy was extended at the Inter-Governmental Conference at Amsterdam; and which countries *(a)* supported and *(b)* approved its extension. [5247]

Mr. Henderson: The voting rules for regional policy—articles 130 a–e—were not changed at Amsterdam. We cannot agree to publish the detailed views expressed by Heads of State and Government in a closed meeting.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to what extent qualified majority voting was extended in respect of industrial policy at the Inter-Governmental Conference at Amsterdam. [5252]

Mr. Henderson: Article 130, the Industry title will remain subject to unanimity. However, it was agreed at Amsterdam that QMV should apply in respect of research and development policy.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to what extent measures concerning *(a)* town and country planning, *(b)* land use and *(c)* management of United Kingdom water resources are subject to the qualified majority vote of all the members of the European Union. [5290]

Mr. Henderson: Article 130s(2), which covers town and country planning, land use, and management of water resources, will remain subject to unanimity.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to what extent qualified majority voting over environmental policy at the Amsterdam Conference was extended. [5289]

Mr. Henderson: Qualified majority voting in the Environment Title was not extended at Amsterdam.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to what extent qualified majority voting over social policy was extended at the Inter-Governmental Conference at Amsterdam. [5248]

Mr. Henderson: Voting arrangements in the current social agreement, now incorporated into the treaty, remain as before. Additions to the draft treaty include articles providing for measures to combat social exclusion (article 118.2), and on equality of opportunity and treatment of men and women (article 119.3). Decisions under these articles are to be taken by QMV.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which countries *(a)* opposed and *(b)* supported the extension of qualified majority voting on environmental policy. [5260]

Mr. Henderson: We cannot agree to publish the detailed views expressed by Heads of State and Government in a closed meeting.

Kenya (Elections)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to monitor elections in Kenya; and if he will make a statement. [5373]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We will seek to contribute to both international and local efforts to monitor the forthcoming elections in Kenya. Our exact plans have yet to be finalised. We are discussing with partners the co-ordination of our joint efforts. Staff from our High Commission in Nairobi are already monitoring voter registration and other preparations for the elections.

Albania

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals he is supporting to strengthen the development of democracy in Albania. [5180]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We fully support the process of democratisation in Albania. We have seconded senior experts to assist the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe Mission which is advising the Albanians on the organisation of the 29 June elections. Twenty-one monitors from the UK, including 11 hon. Members, will observe the poll. More widely we are supporting the efforts of the European Union, the Council of Europe, who are providing advice on the judicial system and media training to the Albanians, and the Western European Union which is advising and training the Albanian police.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the number of nuclear weapons held by parties to international arms control negotiations which are *(a)* vulnerable to an early strike and *(b)* currently on alert status; and if he will make a statement. [4738]

Dr. Reid: I have been asked to reply as this matter falls within my area of responsibility. We share the view of the United States that heavy and multiple warheaded ICBMs are the most potentially vulnerable and destabilising strategic weapons. There are currently several thousand warheads deployed on such systems. We support, therefore, the efforts being made by the US to achieve the deactivation and subsequent elimination of these systems through the ratification by Russia of the START II Treaty.

DEFENCE

Strategic Defence Review

Mr. McAllion: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the terms of reference for the strategic defence review announced by the Government; and if he will place copies of these in the Library. [4746]

Dr. Reid: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) on 19 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *264*. All Members of the House should have received a letter from the Secretary of State setting out the scope of the Strategic Defence Review and how we propose it will be undertaken. A copy of this letter has been placed in the Library of the House.

Departmental Advisers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the special advisers in his Department, the Minister to whom each is responsible, the subjects on which they advise and the number of advisers in his Department in the year up to 1 May. [5350]

Mr. George Robertson: Mr. Alasdair McGowan is already working as my Special Adviser. I have also invited Mr. Bernard Gray to become my Special Adviser and he will take up his appointment next month. Special Advisers are employed under terms and conditions based on the model contract for Special Advisers, a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House. Mr. McGowan provides me with advice on any matter which I decide to refer to him in accordance with Schedule 1 (Part 1) of the model contract. He is also free to raise matters with me. Mr. Gray's appointment will be on the same basis.

In the year up to 1 May 1997, my predecessor employed one Special Adviser.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what review has been undertaken by NATO of its nuclear strategy in response to the World Court's advisory judgment on the legality of the threat of use of nuclear weapons; and what were its conclusions; [4300]

(2) what assessment he has made of the implications of the International Court of Justice's conclusion on the use of nuclear weapons for national defence for their use in defence of a coalition of nations bound by treaty. [4287]

Dr. Reid: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given on 22 May 1997 to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), *Official Report*, column *136*.

The Alliance has carefully examined the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion. The Court concluded by a large majority that there is in international law no comprehensive and universal prohibition of the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. Allies agree that NATO's strategy of war prevention, including its nuclear component, is fully compatible with the United Nations Charter and international law.

Chemical Weapons

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what quantities and types of chemical weapon agents imported from the United States are held in store by the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment; and if he will make a statement on the current safety status of the containers holding these agents. [4303]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Llew Smith, dated 25 June 1997:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the quantities and types of chemical weapon agents imported from the United States held in store by the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency.

Two chemicals are recorded as having being imported from the United States and are currently held in store at CBD. They are Methyl phosphonyl (or phosphonic) dichloride and Methyl phosphonous (or phosphinyl) dichloride. The current holding is 215kg and 1.018 tonnes respectively. These chemicals were included in the UK's declaration under the Chemical Weapons Convention. In addition to these transfers there have been a number of others over the years with the US, which fall below the chemical weapons convention threshold and for which it would involve disproportionate costs to identify.

The declared materials were imported in March 1955 and June 1964 and were transferred to CBD Porton from CBDE Nancekuke, Cornwall when it closed in 1980. They are awaiting disposal and are stored in airtight chemical drums in a controlled storage area. The condition of the containers is checked regularly. We anticipate disposal soon.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what landfill locations are used for the disposal of heavy metals extracted from chemical weapons munitions being incinerated at the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment at Porton Down. [4299]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Llew Smith, dated 25 June 1997.

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about landfill locations used for the disposal of heavy metals extracted from chemical weapons munitions as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency.

The chemical weapons munitions being disposed of at Porton Down do not contain heavy metals so the question of landfill sites does not arise.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what environmental and safety information has been provided to his Department by those contracted to destroy outstanding British chemical weapon grenades, 9140–M6–CN–DM, held at RAF base Bad Wulfen. [4302]

Mr. Spellar: The destruction of outstanding British chemical weapon grenades at BAD Wulfen, is being conducted in accordance with German environmental legislation. Frequent meetings between my Officials, the German Authorities, selected German Army specialists, and the Contractor, have ensured this to be the case. A safety plan was also agreed following detailed discussions between local German government officials, the Contractor, and ammunition specialists from both the British and German Army. The stringent safety regulations already in force within the Ammunition Depot assisted this process. Whilst no specific information has been received by my Department from the Contractor on matters of environment and safety, the Contractor has, as a matter of course, contributed to the procedures which have been put in place.

Ex-service Affairs Unit

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to create an Ex-service Affairs Unit; and what is the expected timetable for the implementation of such a policy. [4776]

Dr. Reid: The Government is aware of proposals made by The Royal British Legion for the creation of an ex-Service Affairs Unit. This is a matter which needs careful consideration, and the Government will be looking into it in some detail.

NATO

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment has been made of the revenue and capital costs of the current plans for NATO expansion. [5385]

Dr. Reid: No decisions have been taken on which countries will accede to NATO membership, when and on what terms. The costs of enlargement, which will fall both on the countries which join and on the existing members of the Alliance and which will be incurred over a long period, will depend on those decisions. Subject to that caveat, we expect the costs of enlargement to be manageable.

Internet

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what use he plans to make of the Internet to make Government more open. [5107]

Mr. Spellar: My Department is committed to providing information on its activities in accordance with the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. We recognise the potential of the Internet to assist in this process. The MOD Home Page is at:

www.mod.uk,

which provides links to other Defence-related pages, including the three Armed Services, who have Home Pages at:

www.army.mod.uk,

www.royal-navy.mod.uk and

www.open.gov.uk/raf.rafhome.htm.

Information on the MOD web-site includes Departmental policy on Open Government and the Departmental complaints procedure, as well as policy developments, Ministerial statements and speeches, procurement and technological matters, and information on MOD organisation. We are currently reviewing the MOD web-site with a view to improving both the presentation and coverage of the information carried on it.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Public Limited Liability Companies

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will introduce measures to ensure that all public limited liability companies are required to file their annual accounts at Companies House within 90 days of the year end. [4822]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I have no plans to do so.

Coal Authority

Ms Cooper: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what progress has been made in appointing a new chief executive of the Coal Authority to succeed Mr. Neville Washington. [5796]

Mr. Battle: The Coal Authority has announced the appointment, with my agreement, of Mr. Kenneth Fergusson as Chief Executive in succession to Mr. Neville Washington.

Auditors (Regulation)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will assess the advantages of replacing the recognised supervisory bodies responsible for regulating auditors with a single independent regulator. [4824]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government's business manifesto said that we would ensure there is a framework of independent regulation for the accounting profession. I shall bear in mind my hon. Friend's suggestion in that context.

Small Company Audits

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will introduce legislation to raise the threshold for small company audits in order to bring it in line with the definition of small company contained in the Companies Acts. [4819]

Mr. Ian McCartney: My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade has no plans to do so. The threshold for audit exemption was last raised on 15 April 1997, following public consultation.

Companies Acts

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will assess the advantages of introducing powers equivalent to those contained in section 150 of the Financial Services Act 1986, into the Companies Act legislation. [4817]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 23 June 1997]:* I have no plans to do so.

Genetically Engineered Food

Mr. Paice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what studies her Department has carried out on the consumer safety aspect of the importation of genetically engineered corn. [5169]

Mr. Rooker: I have been asked to reply.

I take it that the hon. Member is referring to the genetically modified (GM) maize currently being imported into the European Union from the USA, in which case I refer him to the reply given to him about the safety of GM maize earlier today.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Welfare to work

Ms Hewitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what will be the minimum period of unemployment which will qualify lone parents under the age of 25 years for inclusion in the welfare-to-work programme. [4841]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We will offer young people aged 18–24 (including lone parents), who have been unemployed for six months or more, a choice of high quality options designed to help them into work. These include a job, the chance to train, or an opportunity to work in the voluntary sector or on the Environmental Task Force.

We also propose to offer lone parents who are on income support, regardless of age, a package of Employment Service guidance and support in their search for work once their youngest child reaches the second term of full-time education.

Ms Hewitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if, as part of the Welfare to Work programme, he will assess the advantages of introducing, on a pilot basis, social enterprise zones to promote new approaches to generating sustainable employment in disadvantaged communities. [5064]

Mr. Howarth: We are currently working to implement our manifesto commitment to introduce Employment Zones in areas of high unemployment. By encouraging innovative approaches to bringing together and making more coherent different streams of help and funding currently available, Employment Zones will greatly benefit long-term unemployed people and their communities.

Assisted Places

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will publish his criteria for permitting an assisted place to continue to be offered to a child who has reached the age of 11 years. [4721]

Mr. Byers: The Education (Schools) Bill currently before Parliament provides for pupils aged 11 and over at the start of September 1997 to continue to hold their assisted places until the end of their secondary education. The Bill also provides for a discretionary power to allow, in certain circumstances, pupils receiving primary education to continue to hold their assisted places for a further period during which they receive secondary education. Each case will be considered sympathetically and on its own merits, once the Bill has received Royal Assent.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost to the Government of all children *(a)* currently at junior or primary school under the assisted places scheme and *(b)* expected to start this autumn under the scheme remaining in the scheme until the age of 18 years. [5187]

Mr. Byers: Supporting all primary age pupils in junior departments of participating senior schools—both those who took up assisted places in the current academic year and those who are expected to take up places in September 1997—through to age 18 would have cost in the region of £80 million at current prices in England from academic year 1997–98 onwards.

Internet

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what use he plans to make of the Internet to make Government more open. [5106]

Dr. Howells: The Department has a large Internet site which has been progressively developed and extended over the past two years and this will continue. From our new home page we offer signposted information for parents, schools, job seekers and employers. Material is also available on education and training generally and on equal opportunities. Our intention is to extend the site, wherever possible, to ensure that details of all aspects of the Department's policies will be available there.

As the number of people and organisation having access to the Internet increases, the Department plans to make extensive use of it as a medium for consultation on new or planned policy initiatives and to invite and freely exchange views. Later this year, all of the Department's staff will be able to use Internet email to speed communication with outside people and organisations, particularly its "partners" in taking forward improvements in education and training.

Teachers

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to introduce qualified teacher status for teaching staff in universities and colleges. [5356]

Ms Estelle Morris: We shall be considering very carefully what the National Committee of Inquiry has to say about teaching standards in universities and colleges in its report which is expected next month.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many schools in England and Wales currently have grant-maintained status; and what is the total additional budget allocation granted to these schools since 1990 in addition to that which they would have received through their local management of schools funding allocation; [5231]

(2) if he will list the public sources of funding made available to grant-maintained schools and not available to local authority schools indicating the total sums dispensed under each heading since 1990. [5332]

Mr. Byers: Responsibility for education in Wales is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales. There are currently 1188 grant maintained (GM) schools in England. They receive two types of recurrent grants: annual maintenance grant (AMG) in respect of general school running costs and special purpose grants (SPGs) paid for specific purposes. The AMG that GM schools receive includes elements to cover school meals and the central administration and services provided directly by LEAs to LEA maintained schools. These are additional to the school budget shares which LEA schools receive through their LMS schemes.

Special Purpose Grants (SPGs) are intended to mirror existing funding arrangements operating in the LEA sector and to reflect specific aspects of GM status.

The calculation of grants to individual GM schools is a matter for the Funding Agency for Schools (FAS). I have therefore written to Sir Christopher Benson at the Funding Agency to ask him to provide with the figures and detailed background information requested.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much public money has been allocated to *(a)* the Grant-maintained Schools Foundation, *(b)* the Grant-maintained Standing Advisory Committee, *(c)* the Association of Heads of Grant-maintained Schools, *(d)* the National Association of Grant-maintained Primary Schools and *(e)* the Association of Grant-maintained and Aided Schools since the inception of these organisations. [5333]

Mr. Byers: The total grant paid by the Department to the Grant Maintained Schools Foundation since its inception in April 1994 is £2.6 million. Grant to GMSF ceases from 30 June 1997. The Grant Maintained Schools Advisory Committee (GMSAC) has received £0.3 million since April 1994. Prior to that, the Grant Maintained Standing Advisory Committee (the predecessor of GMSAC) was funded from the total grant paid by the Department to the Grant-Maintained Schools Centre (the predecessor of GMSF).

The Department has offered a maximum sum of £15,000 to each of the Association of Heads of Grant Maintained Schools, the National Association of Grant Maintained Primary Schools and the Association of Grant Maintained and Aided Schools to support effective consultation and communication with the GM sector.

Performance League Tables

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans there are to review the present use of performance league tables so as to address the issues of *(a)* utilising value added data and *(b)* the inclusion of absent and statemented pupils; and if he will make a statement. [5354]

Ms Estelle Morris: We are committed to the principle of publishing measures of value added alongside information on school performance. It is important that such measures are statistically valid, do not place an undue administrative burden on schools, and can be readily understood by parents. We have asked the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority to undertake feasibility studies into such measures and then to consult widely with schools, with a view to publication in 1998.

The treatment of absent and statemented pupils in primary performance tables is under review. We expect to announce our final decisions in the autumn on the arrangements for the publication of these tables by local education authorities.

Partnership Agreements

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to introduce home-school partnership agreements; what plans he has to promote a wider role for parent governors and parent representatives; what role the local authority will have in these developments; and if he will make a statement. [5355]

Ms Estelle Morris: Our Manifesto promised that we would increase the powers and responsibilities of parents. We are committed to having more parent governors and to parent representatives on LEAs. A major objective is to promote a culture of responsibility for learning within the family, through contracts between all schools and parents, defining the responsibilities of each. LEAs will have a major part to play in raising standards. We will announce our proposals in a White Paper very soon and initiate widespread consultation.

Pre-school Centres

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements are to be made for the inspection of private nurseries and other pre-school centres in order to control their quality. [5334]

Mr. Byers: The Government is committed to improving the quality of pre-school provision. For the time being, the present arrangements for inspection for private and voluntary providers of nursery education will continue.

We have made clear our intention to examine the regulatory and inspection regimes with a view to making them more uniform. A consultation exercise will begin in the Autumn.

Cash Limits

Mr. Sutcliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what changes he has to announce to cash limits and running cost limits on votes within his responsibility for 1997–98. [5793]

Dr. Howells: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the cash limit for Class IX, Vote 1, Department for Education and Employment programmes and central services, will be increased by £14,693,000 from £9,404,771,000 to £9,419,464,000.

This is the result of a transfer of £1,500,000 to Class X, Vote 1 (the Department of National Heritage) for Dance and Drama students, a transfer of £13,000,000 from Class XI, Vote 1 (the Department of Health) for the merger of Imperial College with the West London Medical School; a decrease of £621,000 in capital expenditure offset by a corresponding increase in the non-Voted DfEE/LACAP cash limit to fund a school capital project, with no overall change to the DfEE's control total, and a switch of £3,814,000 from section G to Section F of the Vote to enable the British Academy to administer the Post Graduate Awards Scheme.

As a result of the changes, the DfEE/LACAP cash limit will be increased by £621,000 from £72,505,000 to £73,126,000.

The running costs provision for Class IX, Vote 1 will be increased by £390,000 from £255,174,000 to £255,564,000. The gross running costs limit for the Department for Education and Employment is increased by £390,000 from £1,056,750,000 to £1,057,140,000.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Aid (Cost-effectiveness)

14. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking further to improve the cost effectiveness of overseas aid. [3868]

Clare Short: The Government will publish a White Paper this autumn which will set out how, through more coherent policies, we will address our prime objective of eliminating poverty and promoting sustainable development.

Yemen

16. **Mr. Rhodri Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proposals she has to improve the targeting of development aid programmes to Yemen. [3871]

Mr. Foulkes: The bilateral programme focuses on key priorities agreed with the Yemeni Government. These are support for the World Bank programme to regenerate Aden Port and help to strengthen economic and financial management within Ministries playing a leading role in Yemen's economic recovery. We also contribute to EU assistance to Yemen.

UNESCO

17. **Mr. O'Hara:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what consultations she has held on the renewal of United Kingdom membership of UNESCO. [3872]

Clare Short: I met Mr. Mayor, UNESCO's Director-General, in London on 2 June. I will follow this up with a visit to UNESCO on 1 July and take the opportunity to meet the UK staff of the organisation. My officials had an initial meeting with the United Nations Association and the Friends of UNESCO on 18 June.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which programmes will not now proceed as a result of the cost to her Department of the UNESCO subscription. [5263]

Mr. Foulkes: I refer the hon. Member to the replies my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development gave to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge), *Hansard* 2 June 1997, column 26, and to the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), *Hansard* 20 May 1997, column 37.

Aid (Targeting)

18. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to ensure that the overseas aid budget is targeted for the benefit of the poorest people in less developed countries. [3873]

Clare Short: The Government are committed to eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development. We are developing coherent policies which promote real and lasting development for poor people.

I am reviewing our existing spending programmes to ensure resources are focused on our central objective of eradicating poverty.

The Government will issue a White Paper in the autumn setting out how we will work with our partners to tackle global poverty and promote sustainable development.

Sustainable Development

19. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she plans following the Prime Minister's announcements at UN General Assembly special session concerning the promoting of sustainable development. [3874]

Clare Short: My Department will follow through the Prime Minister's commitment to sustainable development and combatting poverty in the forthcoming White Paper and play a key role in the initiatives announced on climate change and energy efficiency, forests and fresh water as well as the replenishment of the global environment facility.

Third World Debt

20. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress she has made in implementing her commitment to take steps to reduce third world debt. [3875]

Clare Short: Both my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I have been working to secure a solution to the debt problems of the poorest countries. Agreement on debt relief for a number of countries is expected from creditors over the next few months.

Poverty and Hardship

21. **Mr. Pond:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of a possible link between poverty in the poorest countries of the world and poverty and hardship in the industrialised countries. [3876]

Clare Short: The poor face the same hardships across the world: unequal opportunity; homelessness; lack of income, assets and skills. The country made clear in the general election that it wanted an increase in social justice at home and abroad.

United Nations Industrial Development Organisation

22. **Mr. Mitchell:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she intends to continue British membership of UNIDO. [3878]

Clare Short: I had a useful meeting with the Director-General of UNIDO, Mr. Maurico de Maria y Campos, on 12 June. UK membership of UNIDO is now under active review.

Human Rights

23. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what account she takes of human rights issues in deciding her priorities for overseas aid. [3879]

Clare Short: My Department will adopt a human rights based approach to development. Our distinct contribution will be to focus on those rights which are important for the elimination of poverty and the dignity of the disadvantaged. We will seek to establish development partnerships with Governments that share our aim of poverty eradication.

Multilateral Aid Programmes

24. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussion she has had with the heads of multilateral humanitarian agencies about current multilateral aid programmes. [3880]

Clare Short: I attended a Humanitarian Forum in Switzerland on 8–10 June hosted by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and had discussions with heads of humanitarian agencies. This included the difficulties of access to populations affected by armed conflicts, deliberate attacks on humanitarian workers and violations of international humanitarian law.

My Department is reviewing UK policy on humanitarian assistance as part of the overall process of reform in the UN system.

Bilateral Aid

25. **Mr. Bayley:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to increase the emphasis in United Kingdom bilateral aid on counteracting poverty. [3881]

Clare Short: The elimination of poverty is at the centre of our agenda. I am currently reviewing all of our programmes to ensure that resources are targeted accordingly. A White Paper will issue in the autumn setting out how, through more coherent policies, we will tackle global poverty and promote sustainable development. I am delighted that there is to be a debate on International development policies on 1 July, during which hon. Members will have an opportunity to feed their thoughts and ideas into the paper.

Kashmir

26. **Mr. Godsiff:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance her Department has made available to the refugees displaced by the conflict in Indian-controlled Kashmir to date; and what plans she has for such assistance in the future. [3882]

Clare Short: We have made the following contributions to the Committee of the International Red Cross (ICRC) for its operations in Kashmir and Jammu which include protection, visiting detainees, monitoring and dissemination of International Humanitarian Law.

1994–95: 150,000

1995–96: 150,000

1996–97: 150,000

Future appeals would be sympathetically considered.

Land Mines

27. **Valerie Davey:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what funding her Department is providing for humanitarian mine clearance. [3883]

Clare Short: The UK has committed over £31 million, including our share of European Community activities, to humanitarian demining operations since 1991. We remain committed to an active programme of humanitarian mine clearance.

World Population Growth

28. **Mr. Ottaway:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what policies she has to address the issue of world population growth. [3884]

Clare Short: Our priority is for the elimination of poverty through sustainable development. This goal is impossible to achieve without the early stabilisation of world population. More and more people want to plan their families, have fewer children and give them a better start in life. Many millions are unable to do so. Strategies which improve access to family planning and other reproductive health services will be at the forefront of our international development partnerships.

Africa

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on aid to Africa. [3857]

Clare Short: Forty per cent. of people living in Sub Saharan Africa are living in poverty. This is why Africa is a major focus of our programme. As my hon. Friend will have noticed the Prime Minister announced two initiatives at the Denver summit. First, to increase our commitments in the next three years to basic education, health care and the provision of safe drinking water by 50 per cent. Second, we agreed to untie our contribution to the Special Programme for Africa (SPA).

Aid Budget

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is her Department's target for the proportion of GNP which overseas aid will constitute for each year to 2001; and how this target relates to the UN target. [5269]

Mr. Foulkes: For the next two years we will be working within existing departmental ceilings. But our commitment to reverse the decline in spending as a proportion of GNP remains. We are reviewing existing expenditure plans and I am confident that the strategies that are now being put in place to focus our assistance more directly on poverty eradication, will demonstrate the case for additional resources thereafter.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if it is her policy to achieve an increase in real terms year on year in the overseas aid budget. [5274]

Mr. Foulkes: We will work within existing financial ceilings this year and next while putting in place strategies to deliver progress towards the objective of eradicating poverty. As we demonstrate progress, we expect to justify additional resources being made available in line with our Manifesto commitment.

Departmental Advisers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the special advisers in her Department, the minister to whom each is responsible, the subjects on which they advise and the number of advisers in her Department in the year up to 1 May. [5358]

Clare Short: The Special Advisers in the Department for International Development are Jessica Crowe and Daniel Harris; both are responsible to me. They are employed under terms and conditions based on the "Model Contract for Special Advisers", a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House. Ms Crowe and Mr. Harris are advising me on the development of Government policy and its effective presentation in accordance with Schedule I (Part I) of the Model Contract.

Afghanistan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her policy is on the provision of assistance to Afghanistan; and what steps she is taking to ensure the United Kingdom assistance to areas controlled by the Taliban benefit women as well as men. [3810]

Clare Short: Our policy in Afghanistan is to create an environment where all Afghans, men and women will realise basic human rights leading to a more secure and stable social and economic life.

The UK subscribes to the common donor position on gender and human rights issues in Afghanistan that all parties should recognise, protect and promote the equal rights and dignity of men and women, including access to education, employment outside the home, personal security and freedom from intimidation and harassment. The UK works closely with other donors for the adoption of more appropriate humanitarian policies and strategies and it is our policy to deal robustly with human rights concerns and repeated representations are made to all factions in Afghanistan to this effect.

Earth Summit 2

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the contribution of Earth Summit 2 to the elimination of third world debt. [3811]

Mr. Foulkes: I welcome any discussions which draw attention to the need for sustainable development and the need to tackle the debt problems of some developing countries. Debt relief should be part of a wider economic commitment by debtors to balanced economic reforms which encourage sustainable development. Practical solutions need to be implemented in the appropriate fora.

Bosnia

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the United Kingdom's contribution towards reconstruction in Bosnia. [3870]

Clare Short: We have provided funding for reconstruction projects to underpin the Dayton agreement of December 1995. DFID has contributed £383 million since 1991 in aid to the former Yugoslavia: £213 million bilaterally and £170 million through the European Union.

Twinning

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proposals she has to encourage local authorities to develop twinning links with towns and cities in developing countries. [5171]

Mr. Foulkes: We have been supporting local authority technical links schemes in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia through the Know How Fund since 1991. We are exploring the case for supporting similar institutional linkages in developing countries as part of our current review of the aid programme in preparation for the White Paper.

Foreign Students

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proposals she has to increase opportunities for appropriately qualified young people from developing countries to attend British universities. [5170]

Mr. Foulkes: In financial year 1995–96, the last year for which we have figures, we spent some £69.8 million on over 9,000 scholars and trainees who studied in the UK. I have no proposals to increase this expenditure at present but we welcome any suggestions from Members and others as part of the White Paper consultation.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Dundonald Training Centre

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if Dundonald Training Centre has permission to recruit new trainees; and if she will make a statement. [4244]

Mr. Worthington: Responsibility for this subject has been delegated to the Training and Employment Agency under its chief executive, Mr. Ian Walters. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Ian Walters to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 24 June 1997:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me, as Chief Executive of the Training and Employment Agency, to reply to your question on the recruitment of new trainees to Dundonald Training Centre.

As you know, the Education and Training Minister, Mr Worthington, has announced that Dundonald Training Centre will remain in operation, at a reduced level of activity for a further year. The Centre has been authorised to recruit new trainees for the vocational classes which will be available from September this year. In addition, the Centre will continue to monitor and assess the progress of some 250 trainees who have completed their training at Dundonald and who will continue their NVQ based training and employers.

I hope you find this information useful.

Health and Social Services Staff

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many persons *(a)* are employed now and *(b)* were employed five years ago by the Department of Health and Social Services. [4267]

Mr. Worthington: The information is as follows:

Staff employed by the Department of Health and Social Services

	1992	*1997*
DHSS (HQ)	1,631	1,081
Social Security Agency	5,743	5,617
Child Support Agency	—	1,205
Health Estates Agency	—	117
Total	7,374	8,020

Mr. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many persons *(a)* are employed now and *(b)* were employed five years ago by the Southern area health and social services board, indicating the number of these employed in administration in each case. [4270]

Mr. Worthington: The information requested is as follows:

	1992	*1997*
Total staff	322	154
Administrative and clerical	157	115

I am currently considering levels of administration in the Health Service throughout Northern Ireland to ensure that the maximum level of resources goers straight into patient care.

Mr. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many persons *(a)* are employed now and *(b)* were employed five years ago by the Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust, indicating the number of these employed in administration in each case. [4271]

Mr. Worthington: The information requested is as follows:

	1992	*1997*
Total staff	2,800	3,353
Administrative and clerical	290	350

Fair Employment Commission

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* Roman Catholics and *(b)* Protestants are employed by the Fair Employment Commission. [4269]

Mr. Worthington: The latest available information on numbers and religious composition of staff employed by the Fair Employment Commission for Northern Ireland is contained in the Commission's Seventh Monitoring Report which was published in March 1997. The report shows that at 1 January 1996, the position was as follows:

Protestant: 38 (42.7 per cent.)

Roman Catholic: 51 (57.3 per cent.

Total: 89

Planning

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what factors led to the exclusion of the area plans for the Down and Newry and Mourne district council areas from the Planning Agency's business case for the financial year 1996–97. [4264]

(2) what is the time scale for the commencement and execution of the work required in respect of the Down and Newry and Mourne area plans; [4265]

(3) when the business and corporate plan for the Planning Agency for 1997–98 will be published. [4266]

Mr. Murphy: Responsibility for this subject has been delegated to the Planning Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. T. W. Stewart. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from T. W. Stewart to Eddie McGrady, dated 20 June 1997:

Lord Dubs has asked me to reply to your questions about the Down and Newry and Mourne area plans, and also about the publication of the Planning Service's Corporate and Business Plan 1997–98.

Only Development Plans which were to be adopted in 1996–97 were included in the Agency's Business Plan for that year. The position is the same for the 1997–98 Business Plan, published earlier this month, a copy of which is available in the Library. When drawing up plans for 1998–99 and future years, the programming of work on both plans will be taken into account in accordance with competing priorities and available resources. At present, there is no agreed time-scale for the commencement and execution of the work.

Although the notional end date for the Down Area Plan is late 1997 and for the Newry and Mourne Area Plan late 1999, they will remain material planning considerations in the determination of any planning applications submitted after those dates.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many cases of benefit fraud are currently *(a)* being investigated and *(b)* awaiting trial, as a result of people contacting the Benefit Fraud Hotline; and if he will make a statement; [1547]

(2) how many convictions have resulted from evidence gathered from the Benefit Fraud Hotline; and if he will make a statement; [1548]

(3) how many people have rung the Benefit Fraud Hotline in each month since it was introduced; and if she will make a statement. [1546]

Mr. Denham: Modernising the Social Security system is one of our key priorities. Our objective is to reduce poverty and welfare dependency and to promote work incentives. We will develop a system that supports work, savings and honesty. We will streamline services to provide better, simpler more efficient services to clients. We will be vigilant in tackling fraud, ensuring value for taxpayers' money and rebuilding confidence in the Social Security system.

The operation of the National Benefit Fraud Hotline is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Archy Kirkwood, dated 24 June 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions concerning the Benefit Fraud Hotline.

There are 20,090 referrals from the National Benefit Fraud Hotline currently under investigation. The number of cases that have been referred for prosecution to date as a result of calls to the Hotline is 185.

The number of convictions arising from referrals to the Hotline is not collated.

The number of calls to the Hotline is shown in the attached table. Information is not yet available for May 1997.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Number of calls to the national Benefit Fraud Hotline

Month	*Duration*	*Number of calls*
1996		
August	4 weeks	41,826
September	5 weeks	32,633
October	4 weeks	22,360
November	4 weeks	21,805
December	4 weeks	14,139
1997		
January	4 weeks	15,831
February	4 weeks	27,075
March	5 weeks	31,185
April	4 weeks	18,680

Figures are provisional and subject to change.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will list the value of fraudulent claims uncovered by the Benefits Agency in each of the 13 area directorates for each of the last five years for which figures are available *(a)* in terms of the cash value of benefits saved and *(b)* as a percentage of total payments made for each of the benefits administered. [3214]

Mr. Denham: One of our key aims is to restore confidence in the benefit system by tackling fraud and ensuring value for taxpayers money. Queries on Benefits Agency operational matters are the responsibility of Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Archy Kirkwood, dated 23 June 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question requesting the value of fraudulent claims uncovered by the Benefit Agency (BA) in each of the 13 area directorates for each of the last five years for which figures are available (a) in terms of the cash value of benefits saved and (b) as a percentage of total payments made for each of the benefits administered.

The information is not available in the format requested. Fraud savings are derived from more than one source including the Benefit Fraud Investigation Service (BFIS), Organised Fraud Investigations (OFI), Central Benefit Directorates and, from 1995/96, the Security and Control Programme. The differing organisational set up within these sections do not match the Area Directorate structure. However figures are available for total fraud savings for the BA and are shown in the attached Annex.

The savings are shown as Weekly Benefit Savings (WBS) and not in strict cash terms. WBS are calculated by multiplying the actual amount of benefit saved by 32 (32 weeks being the average length of time that benefit would have been paid, if it had not been reduced or withdrawn following the intervention of a fraud officer.)

While this gives an assessment of the amounts of benefit saved by counter fraud activity, it does not show the public expenditure savings accruing in that year from current and previous activity.

Changes were introduced in the 1996 budget to try and refine the way savings are accounted for in the public expenditure plans. Savings are no longer attributed wholly to the year in which the fraud is detected, but spread over the period which the fraud would otherwise on average have continued. Due to changes in accounting methods a direct comparison in cash terms with previous years is not possible.

We do not collate fraud savings separately by benefit type. Therefore fraud savings are expressed as a percentage of the total programme spend on all benefits for the last five years.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Year	*BA fraud (WBS) savings (£ billion)*	*BA programme expenditure (£ billion approximately)*	*Fraud savings (WBS) as a percentage of programme expenditure*
1991–92	0.447	56	0.8
1992–93	0.558	62	0.9
1993–94	0.654	67	0.98
1994–95	0.717	70	1.02
1995–96	1.222	73	1.67

1. Figures are provisional and subject to change.
2. Both BA fraud savings/programme expenditure figures exclude those attributable to local authorities.
3. Savings figures for 1996–97 are not yet available.

Pensions Review

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if it is her policy that the reform of social security currently being considered by the Government should benefit individuals currently in receipt of pensions as well as those who are not yet pensioners. [2295]

Mr. Denham: The Government believes that all pensioners should share fairly in increasing national prosperity. We will set up a review of the central areas of insecurity for elderly people: all aspects of the basic pension and its value, second pensions including SERPS, and community care.

Asylum Seekers

Ms Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to reinstate benefits for asylum seekers. [2439]

Mr. Bradley: We are committed to a wide ranging review of Social Security: our aim is to encourage independence and reduce poverty. The position of asylum seekers will be considered as part of this review.

Following the Home Secretary's declaration on 16 May 1997 of Zaire as a country of upheaval, a Zairean national who entered previously and applies for asylum within three months of the declaration being made, is eligible to claim income support, income based jobseeker's allowance, housing benefit and council tax benefit while his or her asylum application is considered by the Home Office.

Platform for Action

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will publish an annual Government report on the progress of the 1995 Platform for Action; and if she will make a statement. [3917]

Ms Ruddock: We will be publishing an annual Government report on the progress of the Platform for Action. The Platform for Action was the outcome document of the United Nations' 4th World Conference on Women. It covers matters of concern to women and girls in all areas of policy and has set the agenda for governments and non-governmental organisations as they work to promote equality between women and men. We are fully committed to its implementation.

Pensioners (Benefits)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will list for each of the last 10 years for which figures are available how much *(a)* income support, *(b)* housing benefit and *(c)* council tax relief has been claimed by men aged between 60 and 64 years. [3845]

Mr. Bradley: Modernising the Social Security system to reduce poverty and welfare dependency and to promote work incentives is one of this Government's key priorities.

The available information is in the tables.

Income support

£ million

Year	*Income support*
1987–88	n/a
1988–89	n/a
1989–90	435.9
1990–91	442.7
1991–92	504.5
1992–93	559.9
1993–94	618.3
1994–95	646.3
1995–96	649.4
1996–97	661.6

Source:
Income Support Annual Statistical Enquiries May 1989–May 1992. Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries May 1993–May 1996.

Housing benefit and council tax benefit

£ million

Year	*Housing Benefit*	*Council Tax Benefit*
1994–95	223	64
1995–96	218	59

Source:
Housing Benefit Management Information System and Departmental Report.
Notes:
1. Figures are estimated.
2. Figures are not available for years prior to 1994 because no data were held which identified recipients by gender.

Mortgage Interest Payments

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to review the period between claims for payment of mortgage interest by recipients of income support and the first payments; and if she will make a statement. [3841]

Mr. Bradley: The Government is committed to reforming and modernising the welfare state to fulfil the objectives of promoting work incentives, reducing poverty and welfare dependency, and strengthening community and family life.

This will involve considering, with lenders and insurers, a range of measures to give more security to home-owners with a mortgage. We will keep detailed benefit rules under consideration as we develop our plans.

Young People

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will list the main changes in Social Security law that have affected the entitlement of *(a)* 16 to 17 year-olds and *(b)* 17 to 25-year-olds or their parents to benefit in the last five years. [4166]

Mr. Bradley: The main changes in the last five years affecting benefit entitlement for 16 to 17-year-olds and 17 to 25-year-olds were as follows:

For 16 to 25-year-olds

In Jobseeker's Allowance, which was introduced in October 1996, there is a common rule which ensures that all unemployed people aged 18 to 24 are treated the same, regardless of their contribution record. A person of this age who is entitled to Jobseeker's Allowance, whether contribution-based or income-based, will be paid at a lower rate than that for a person aged 25 years or over.

In Housing Benefit, the main change was the restriction of the amount of rent which can be used to calculate benefit entitlement. It limits the rent to the average cost of non-self-contained accommodation in the locality in which the claimant lives. This chance affects most claimants under 25 living in the private rented sector, and was introduced on 6 October 1996.

For families

From April 1997 (for Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit) and October 1997 (Family Credit and Disability Working Allowance), the date from which age-related increases for children aged 11 and 16 are paid has been moved from the birthday itself to the first Monday in September following the birthday. There is no longer an increase in the rate for young dependent people on reaching age 18.

In Family Credit, from July 1996, Family Credit awards terminate when a child leaves full-time education, but only in families where the child is the last remaining child in the family.

In April 1995, rules in Severe Disablement Allowance for claiming adult dependency increases and child dependency increases were aligned with Incapacity Benefit.

Other measures have been introduced in the last five years (for example Incapacity Benefit and Disability Living Allowance) which may have affected young people or their parents, but the measures have not been targeted at these groups particularly.

This Government's intention is to modernise the Social Security system so that it supports work, savings and honesty. One of our first steps is to focus on helping people off welfare and into work.

Low Pay

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time persons employed by her Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3 an hour. [4199]

Mr. Field: The information requested is in the table.

	Full-time	*Part-time*
Less than £3.00 per hour	None	None
Less than £3.50 per hour	6,472	1,017
Less than £4.00 per hour	[1]10,392	[1]1,347

[1] Figures also include those staff paid at £3.50 per hour.

1. The information includes staff who are employed on a casual basis.

2. For the purposes of this table, the hourly rates quoted above are based on a 42 hours conditioned working week which includes payment for a lunch hour each working day (i.e., for 5 hours).

3. Figures are based on basic salary and exclude allowances.

4. All staff (excluding those employed on a casual basis) may elect to join the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme which is not based on employee contributions. Civil service pay rates have traditionally reflected the non-contributory nature of these pension arrangements.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment she has made of the levels of accuracy currently achieved by the CSA; and if she will make a statement. [4631]

Mr. Bradley: We intend to look closely at all aspects of the Child Support Agency to ensure that it provides an efficient and effective service.

The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mrs. Faith Boardman to Mr. Ian Pearson, dated 24 June 1997:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about Child Support Agency accuracy levels.

The 1997–98 Secretary of State target set for the Agency relating to accuracy is for the cash value of all assessments checked in the year to be correct in at least 85% of cases.

Performance against this target is determined by examination of a statistically valid sample of maintenance assessments, which are checked to ensure that the cash value of the assessment (or change to the assessment) is correct within one penny. To satisfy the target 85% of all cases checked throughout the year must be correct to the last penny.

The accuracy of the cash value maintenance has improved over recent years for 79% reported for March 1996 to 87% reported for March 1997. Performance against the target in this financial year has been maintained at this level, with accuracy running at 86% in April and 88% in May.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the average length of time from the issue of a maintenance inquiry form by the CSA to the issuing of the maintenance assessment. [4627]

Mr. Bradley: We expect the Child Support Agency to provide an efficient and effective service to all its clients throughout the child support assessment process.

The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mrs. Faith Boardman to Mr. Ian Pearson, dated 24 June 1997:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the processing of applications for child support. I am afraid I cannot give you precise information in the format you have requested.

The Agency does not collect general information on average processing times, but measures performance against its Secretary of State target relating to the clearance of applications. In 1996–97, the target was to clear 60 per cent. of new maintenance applications within 26 weeks, with no more than 10 per cent. of outstanding applications to be over 52 weeks old. Over the full year, 54 per cent. of new maintenance applications were cleared within 26 weeks, and 12 per cent. of all applications were over 52 weeks old at 31 March 1997. Performance improved towards the end of the year, so that the in-month figure for clearances within 26 weeks stood at 60 per cent. in February and 63 per cent. in March.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many second tier reviews were conducted by the CSA in *(a)* 1994–95, *(b)* 1995–96 and *(c)* 1996–97; and what was the average length of time taken from receipt of request for review to notification of its outcome; [4629]

(2) what is the current backlog in second tier review work in the CSA. [4630]

Mr. Bradley: We expect the CSA to provide an efficient and effective service to all its clients. The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mrs. Faith Boardman to Mr. Ian Pearson, dated 24 June 1997:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Questions to the Secretary of State for Social Security concerning second tier reviews.

Details of clearances for the last three years are as follows:

1994–95: 28,272

1995–96: 26,955

1996–97: 36,339

The improved performance in 1996–97 is a direct result of the drive within the Agency to reduce the number of reviews outstanding. At the end of 1995–96, this stood at 11,189, but by 31 March 1997 had been reduced to 6,279. The numbers continue to fall, with 4,903 reviews outstanding at the end of May 1997.

The Agency does not collect information on average processing times. We do, however, have details of the age of the cases on hand, with cases over 26 weeks old considered to be in arrears. Our drive to reduce the number of reviews outstanding concentrated particularly on the clearance of these older cases, with the result that only 647 applications were over 26 weeks old at the end of the year, compared to 3,056 at the end of 1995–96. At 31 May, this had increased slightly to 699 cases.

I hope this is helpful.

Disability Living Allowance (Children)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what plans she has to review the exclusion of children under five years of age from the mobility component of disability living allowance; [4774]

(2) what is her Department's estimate of the annual cost of extending the mobility component of disability living allowance to children aged under five years of age. [4775]

Mr. Denham: We are planning to review provision for disabled people to reduce poverty and welfare dependency and provide work incentives. We will announce the scope for that review in due course. The estimated annual cost of extending the mobility component of disability living allowance to children under five years of age would be £40 million.

WALES

Minimum Wage

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time employees of his Department and its agencies are paid (i) less than £4 an hour, (ii) less than £3.50 an hour and (iii) less than £3 an hour. [4194]

Mr. Ron Davies: Full and part-time staff are paid on the same basis; the number of hours worked does not affect the hourly rate of pay.

On 31 March 1997, the number of permanent staff in Welsh Office and its Agency (Cadw) earning less than:

(i) £4 per hour was 128.

(ii) £3.50 per hour was nil.

(iii) £3 per hour was nil.

In addition some 180 casual staff were employed on 31 March 1997 as AA or equivalent. Many of these will be employed towards the bottom of the relevant pay scale which is equivalent to less than £4 per hour. Information about precise numbers can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Devolution

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he intends to produce a popular version of the proposed White Paper on devolution for Wales. [4298]

Mr. Ron Davies: We shall be producing a factual and informative leaflet in good time before the referendum.

Belmont Special School

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will visit Belmont special school, Buckley, Flintshire. [4456]

Mr. Hain: Neither I nor my right hon. Friend has any plans to visit the school. Subject to other commitments, we are happy to consider invitations to visit schools in Wales, including special schools.

State Schools

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the total value of balances held by state schools in Wales. [5067]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 23 June 1997]:* According to section 122 outturn statements for 1995–96, the latest year for which this information is available, LEA maintained schools in Wales held balances of just under £50 million. This equates to an average balance of

£25,500 per school. Grant-maintained schools in Wales had net current assets of £958,969, allocated across various heads including capital funds. This equates to an average balance—including capital funds—of £59,936.

The overall average balance for all schools in Wales is £25,780.

Sarn-y-Bryn Caled Road Junction

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer of 16 June, *Official Report*, column 62, if finance is available for the provision of a roundabout at the Sarn-y-Bryn Caled junction, Welshpool, in the current roads programme; and what is the expected completion date for the work on the roundabout. [4870]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 24 June 1997]:* I am not able to confirm the finance available for the roads programme for 1998–99 until completion of our roads programme review due later this year. Once started, the anticipated contract duration for the redevelopment is six months.

Public Bodies

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the administrative and other running costs of each public body to which he makes appointments in rank order for the last year for which figures are available. [4536]

Mr. Ron Davies: The following tables set out the latest available information for those bodies to which the Secretary of State makes appointments, as listed in the annual publication, "Public Bodies", copies of which are available in the Library of the House.

Non-departmental public bodies

	Running costs budget 1997–98 £
Executive NDPRs	
Welsh Development Agency	20,171,000
National Museum and Galleries of Wales	10,452,000
Countryside Council for Wales	8,900,000
National Library of Wales	4,870,000
Cardiff Bay Development Corporation	4,497,000
Wales Tourist Board	3,958,000
Development Board for Rural Wales	3,580,000
Tai Cymru	2,770,000
Further Education Funding Council for Wales	2,425,000
Arts Council of Wales	2,004,000
Land Authority for Wales	1,890,000
Higher Education Funding Council for Wales	1,616,000
Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales	1,573,000
Welsh Language Board	1,109,000
Sports Council of Wales	995,000
Welsh National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting	975,000
Residuary Body for Wales	920,700
Agricultural Wages Committee	3,286
Advisory NDPRs	
Local Government Boundary Commission for Wales	500,000
Welsh Industrial Development Advisory Board	53,000
Welsh Medical Committee	21,000
Welsh Pharmaceutical Committee	18,000
Welsh Scientific Advisory Committee	16,000

Non-departmental public bodies

	Running costs budget 1997–98 £
Historical Buildings Council for Wales	15,000
Staff Commission for Wales	11,000
Welsh Committee on Drug and Alcohol Misuse	10,000
Library and Information Services Council (Wales)	9,000
Welsh Committee for Post Graduate Pharmaceutical Education	8,940
Ancient Monuments Board for Wales	8,000
Welsh Nursing and Midwifery Committee	8,000
Welsh Dental Committee	7,500
Welsh Council for Post Graduate Medical and Dental Education	5,500
Hill Farming Advisory Sub-Committee for Wales[1]	3,000
Welsh Optical Committee	1,500
Environment Agency Advisory Committee for Wales	1,314
Agricultural Dwelling House Advisory Committee	1,000
Place Names Advisory Committee	600
Tribunals	
Rent Assessment Panel for Wales	163,500
Registered Inspectors Appeals Tribunal (Wales)	10,000

[1] Appointments made jointly by MAFF Minister and Secretary of State for Wales.

	Running costs expenditure 1995–96 £[1]
Health authorities	
Gwent health authority	Not available on individual basis
Bro Taf health authority	Not available on individual basis
Dyfed Powys health authority	Not available on individual basis
North Wales health authority	Not available on individual basis
Iechyd Morganwg health	Not available on individual basis
Total	28,435,000
Special health authorities	
Welsh health common services authority	518,000
Health promotion Wales	1,081,000

[1] The total running costs figure is that given in the audited accounts for 1995–96 of the 16 authorities (HAs and FHSAs) which merged into 5 Health Authorities on 1 April 1996. In view of the merger this figure cannot be taken as a reliable indicator for subsequent years.

NHS trusts	*Running costs expenditure 1995–96* £[1]
University Hospital of Wales Healthcare NHS Trust	100,538,000
Glan Hafren NHS Trust	61,047,000
Bridgend and District NHS Trust	46,476,000
Gofal Cymuned Clwydian Community Care NHS Trust	45,870,000
Pembrokeshire and Derwen NHS Trust[2]	45,114,000
Glan-y-Mor NHS Trust	44,895,000
Morriston Hospital NHS Trust	42,463,000
Gwent Community Health NHS Trust	40,730,000
North Glamorgan NHS Trust	38,676,000
Gwynedd Hospitals NHS Trust	38,383,000
Cardiff Community Healthcare NHS Trust	38,075,000
Glan Clwyd District General Hospital NHS Trust	37,979,000

NHS trusts	Running costs expenditure 1995–96 £[1]
Llandough Hospital and Community NHS Trust	37,846,000
Wrexham Maelor Hospital NHS Trust	35,308,000
Gwynedd Community Health NHS Trust	34,367,000
Swansea NHS Trust	33,367,000
East Glamorgan NHS Trust	32,631,000
Powys Health Care NHS Trust	29,582,000
Nevill Hall and District NHS Trust	28,529,000
Carmarthen and District NHS Trust	26,210,000
Rhondda Health Care NHS Trust	20,806,000
Llanelli Dinefwr NHS Trust	20,270,000
Ceredigion and Mid Wales NHS Trust	16,426,000
South and East Wales Ambulance NHS Trust	11,982,000
North Wales Ambulance NHS Trust	8,800,000
West Wales Ambulance NHS Trust	7,355,000
Velindre NHS Trust	6,938,000
Mid Glamorgan Ambulance NHS Trust	5,814,000
University Dental Hospital	5,158,000

[1] The figures provided are taken from the Trusts audited accounts for 1995–96 except those for the Glan-y-Mor and North Glamorgan NHS Trusts which came into existence on or after 1 April 1996, which are estimates based on the size and type of Trust.

[2] Costs for Pembrokeshire and Derwen NHS Trust are totals of the two trusts which existed prior to their merger on 1 April 1997.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 26 June 1997

HOME DEPARTMENT

Driving Offences

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action the Government are taking to ensure that non-British nationals committing driving offences in this country will be brought to justice in Britain. [4635]

Mr. Michael: Any person, whether or not a British national, who commits an offence of any kind in the United Kingdom and leaves the jurisdiction before being dealt with may be summonsed to return for trial. The summons may be served on the person out of the jurisdiction, though by virtue of section 2(3) of the Criminal Justice (International Co-operation) Act 1990, failure to appear in response to the summons is not punishable under United Kingdom law. In the case of a serious offence, it may be possible to seek the person's extradition to stand trial in the United Kingdom.

Immigration

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the procedures to be followed in respect of those primary purpose cases before tribunals withdrawn following the guidance given to the Chief Adjudicator on 6 May; and if he will indicate when guidance will be given on the case of Mrs. Sewarra (case number TH/4170/96. [5494]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Following the abolition of the primary purpose rule, Home Office officials are reviewing all outstanding appeals where primary purpose was one of the grounds for refusal to decide whether there is sufficient evidence to contest the appeal on any of the other grounds quoted in the refusal letter. If the refusal was based solely on primary purpose or if there is insufficient evidence to contest the other grounds, the entry clearance officer will be instructed to issue entry clearance and invite the appellant to withdraw the appeal. In all other cases, the appeal will be contested. Officials are keeping the Independent Appellate Authority, which is solely responsible for listing appeals, informed as this review proceeds. The review of some 1,500 outstanding appeals will be completed as soon as possible. I have written to the hon. Member on the case he raises.

Perjury

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what is the longest term of imprisonment imposed by the courts on an individual found guilty of perjury since 1979; [5501]

(2) how many persons have been prosecuted and found guilty of perjury in each year since 1979. [5502]

Mr. Michael: The longest term of imprisonment imposed at the Crown Court since 1979 for an offence of perjury is five years (given in 1987 and 1989).

Prosecution and conviction data are shown in the table:

Number of persons prosecuted at magistrates' courts and convicted [1] at all courts for offences of perjury [2], 1979–1995

England and Wales

Year	*Prosecuted*	*Convicted [1]*
1979	149	135
1980	158	174
1981	146	145
1982	148	131
1983	147	139
1984	161	186
1985	166	162
1986	124	124
1987	183	167
1988	220	203
1989	226	195
1990	176	160
1991	217	166
1992	212	164
1993	198	150
1994	198	144
1995	232	193

[1] Includes persons proceeded against in earlier years or for other offences.

[2] An offence under the Perjury Act 1911 and Criminal Justice Act 1925, Sec. 36, Criminal Justice Act 1967 Sec. 89, Mines and Quarries (Tips) Act 1969 Sec.12(2) (in part), Magistrates' Courts Act 1980 Sec. 106, Mental Health Act 1983 Sec. 126(4), County Courts Act 1984 Sec. 133, and Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 Sec. 75.

Surrey Police Force

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of policemen trained by the Surrey Police Force remain with the Surrey Police Force after five years' service; and what is the corresponding figure for the rest of England and Wales. [5457]

Mr. Michael: The information is not available. However, if the hon. member would like to write to me setting out his concerns in detail, I will reply as fully as I can.

Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority has for publishing further guidance notes. [5117]

Mr. Michael: In accordance with paragraph 21 of the criminal injuries compensation scheme, which came into effect on 1 April 1996, the Authority published at that time its guide to the operation of the scheme as a whole. It has supplemented that by issuing more specialised guidance on the assessment of loss of earnings and special expenses, compensation in fatal cases, the procedures applicable in cases of child abuse and the administration of awards to minors. The Authority has no immediate plans for further guidance, but is always ready to consider requests for such guidance.

Pornography

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he next intends to meet the Internet Service Providers Association to discuss the issues of pornography on electronic networks. [4735]

Mr. Michael: I intend to meet the Chief Executive of Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) shortly. The IWF is an independent industry body set up on 23 September 1996 with the support of the two major Internet Service Providers Trade Associations (the Internet Service Providers Association and the London Internet Exchange (LINX)) to tackle the problems of illegal material (particularly child pornography) on the Internet.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment his Department has made of the extent to which child pornography is being placed on the Internet by persons in the United Kingdom. [4736]

Mr. Michael: We are concerned about the presence of child pornography on the Internet and the relative ease of access to such material. With the Metropolitan Police and other interested parties, we are examining ways of controlling access to such material. The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) was set up last year to tackle the problems of illegal material (particularly child pornography) on the Internet and established a hotline on 3 December so that users could report the present of child pornography in a newsgroup. Since then, IWF, have received 94 reports, covering 1,008 separate items relating to child pornography, of which 9, covering 71 items, refer to material apparently placed on the Internet by persons within the United Kingdom.

Bookmakers Committee

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reconstitute the Bookmakers Committee. [6135]

Mr. George Howarth: After careful consideration, we have decided to implement the proposals for reconstituting the Bookmakers Committee previously consulted on.

I have today made regulations under section 26 of the Betting, Gaming and Lotteries Act 1963 which will come into force on 24 July.

We consider that the new make-up of the Committee strikes a reasonable balance between the different bookmaking interests.

The Committee will continue to consist of 12 members. The main change is to give representation to a new body, the British Betting Office Association, which will be invited to appoint two members to the Committee.

The Betting Office Licensees Association (which previously appointed five members) is to appoint six members of the Committee, as a consequence of its merger with the National Sporting League (which previously appointed one member).

The National Association of Bookmakers is to appoint three members of the Committee (previously five): and the Scottish Starting Price (SP) Bookmakers Association will continue to appoint one member.

We will keep the position under review.

Fire Safety (HMOs)

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many fires occurred in houses in multiple occupation in the years 1990 to 1996; and how many *(a)* deaths and *(b)* injuries resulted from these fires. [4732]

Mr. George Howarth: The available information on dwellings for 1990 to 1995 is given in the tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library. The data for 1994 and 1995 do not reliably identify houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) from other types of dwelling. A more detailed analysis of fires in multiple occupied dwellings in the United Kingdom was published in pages 30–33 of "Fire Statistics, United Kingdom, 1993", a copy of which is in the Library. The enforcement of fire safety precautions in HMOs is a policy responsibility of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. His Department is currently funding a research study looking in depth at the incidence and causes of fire death in HMOs. It is hoped to publish the report later this year.

Fires[1,2] and casualties in multiple occupancy dwellings by brigade area, UK 1995

	Multiple occupancy dwellings		
	Fires	*Fatalities*	*Non-fatal casualties*
England and Wales	19,992	152	4,289
England	19,203	147	4,087
England: Non-Met counties	7,515	60	1,716
Avon	402	0	49
Bedfordshire	145	2	29
Berkshire	214	2	37
Buckinghamshire	224	0	12
Cambridgeshire	114	2	31
Cheshire	272	2	67
Cleveland	202	0	60
Cornwall	61	3	11
Cumbria	129	0	16
Derbyshire	122	2	59
Devon	381	1	95
Dorset	187	5	29
Durham	83	1	16
East Sussex	475	5	107
Essex	269	3	61
Gloucestershire	108	1	32
Hampshire	418	1	94
Hereford and Worcester	128	1	22
Hertfordshire	199	2	36
Humberside	264	4	70
Isle of Wight	44	0	10
Kent	327	2	94
Lancashire	721	6	165
Leicestershire	159	2	30
Lincolnshire	56	1	17
Norfolk	164	0	34
North Yorkshire	99	1	24
Northamptonshire	137	3	38
Northumberland	25	0	5
Nottinghamshire	269	1	86
Oxfordshire	142	0	41
Shropshire	67	0	23
Somerset	69	1	15
Staffordshire	189	1	49
Suffolk	165	4	29
Surrey	149	1	44
Warwickshire	93	0	11
West Sussex	174	0	39
Wiltshire	69	0	29

Fires[1,2] and casualties in multiple occupancy dwellings by brigade area, UK 1995

	Multiple occupancy dwellings		
	Fires	*Fatalities*	*Non-fatal casualties*
England: Met counties	11,688	87	2,371
Greater Manchester	1,474	10	477
Merseyside	917	4	337
South Yorkshire	520	3	53
Tyne and Wear	773	2	201
West Midlands	2,145	9	287
West Yorkshire	913	7	225
Greater London	4,946	52	791
Wales	790	5	202
Clwyd	96	1	52
Dyfed	95	0	13
Gwent	89	0	25
Gwynedd	49	0	10
Mid Glamorgan	117	1	35
Powys	18	0	3
South Glamorgan	193	2	43
West Glamorgan	132	1	21

[1] Including additional late call and heat and smoke damage incidents (not recorded prior to 1994). Figures are rounded and the components do not necessarily sum to the independently rounded totals.
[2] Excluding fires confined to chimneys.

Fires[1,2] and casualties in multiple occupancy dwellings by brigade area, UK 1994

	Multiple occupancy dwellings		
	Fires	*Fatalities*	*Non-fatal casualties*
England and Wales	19,836	123	4,052
England	19,107	121	3,863
England: Non-Met counties	7,404	42	1,631
Avon	452	2	63
Bedfordshire	124	1	40
Berkshire	158	0	46
Buckinghamshire	259	1	14
Cambridgeshire	127	0	26
Cheshire	225	1	35
Cleveland	191	0	25
Cornwall	56	0	16
Cumbria	166	2	29
Derbyshire	157	1	57
Devon	388	0	86
Dorset	161	1	44
Durham	65	0	17
East Sussex	468	2	88
Essex	288	0	77
Gloucestershire	80	1	27
Hampshire	379	4	116
Hereford and Worcester	145	0	27
Hertfordshire	194	3	37
Humberside	316	3	48
Isle of Wight	50	0	4
Kent	328	4	74
Lancashire	594	1	126
Leicestershire	158	0	35
Lincolnshire	84	1	14
Norfolk	180	0	47
North Yorkshire	101	2	35
Northamptonshire	123	2	29
Northumberland	57	0	9
Nottinghamshire	311	2	60
Oxfordshire	130	2	50
Shropshire	104	1	18
Somerset	39	1	6
Staffordshire	227	0	38
Suffolk	129	0	26
Surrey	211	4	50
Warwickshire	61	0	31
West Sussex	95	0	44
Wiltshire	21	0	17

Fires[1,2] and casualties in multiple occupancy dwellings by brigade area, UK 1994

	Multiple occupancy dwellings		
	Fires	*Fatalities*	*Non-fatal casualties*
England: Met counties	11,703	79	2,232
Greater Manchester	1,426	13	416
Merseyside	855	5	279
South Yorkshire	605	2	92
Tyne and Wear	767	5	177
West Midlands	2,279	10	329
West Yorkshire	988	2	178
Greater London	4,783	42	761
Wales	728	2	189
Clwyd	96	0	37
Dyfed	101	0	12
Gwent	88	0	23
Gwynedd	72	0	15
Mid Glamorgan	100	1	24
Powys	14	0	3
South Glamorgan	119	1	53
West Glamorgan	137	0	22

[1] Including additional late call and heat and smoke damage incidents (not recorded prior to 1994). Figures are rounded and the components do not necessarily sum to the independently rounded totals.
[2] Excluding fires confined to chimneys.

Fires[1] and casualties in multiple occupancy dwellings by brigade area, UK 1993

	Multiple occupancy dwellings		
	Fires	*Fatalities*	*Non-fatal casualties*
England and Wales	20,194	118	3,821
England	19,496	113	3,649
England: Non-Met counties	7,121	45	1,396
Avon	371	3	72
Bedfordshire	127	2	14
Berkshire	152	2	23
Buckinghamshire	197	1	11
Cambridgeshire	109	1	37
Cheshire	255	1	44
Cleveland	171	3	36
Cornwall	68	0	15
Cumbria	157	1	15
Derbyshire	139	0	43
Devon	332	1	82
Dorset	144	1	27
Durham	97	0	26
East Sussex	361	2	63
Essex	250	2	60
Gloucestershire	103	0	15
Hampshire	310	2	58
Hereford and Worcester	115	0	27
Hertfordshire	189	0	29
Humberside	287	0	55
Isle of Wight	49	1	4
Kent	336	2	53
Lancashire	587	4	126
Leicestershire	196	2	41
Lincolnshire	81	0	26
Norfolk	171	1	39

Fires[1] and casualties in multiple occupancy dwellings by brigade area, UK 1993

	Multiple occupancy dwellings		
	Fires	*Fatalities*	*Non-fatal casualties*
North Yorkshire	136	0	23
Northamptonshire	121	0	25
Northumberland	62	2	11
Nottinghamshire	303	0	58
Oxfordshire	106	1	8
Shropshire	58	0	5
Somerset	74	3	10
Staffordshire	218	1	65
Suffolk	161	0	18
Surrey	179	2	69
Warwickshire	98	1	11
West Sussex	164	3	40
Wiltshire	87	0	12
England: Met counties	12,375	68	2,253
Greater Manchester	1,664	7	510
Merseyside	944	2	272
South Yorkshire	607	3	85
Tyne and Wear	731	6	161
West Midlands	2,425	8	266
West Yorkshire	802	6	188
Greater London	5,202	36	771
Wales	698	5	172
Clwyd	76	0	12
Dyfed	58	2	25
Gwent	98	0	23
Gwynedd	70	0	18
Mid Glamorgan	116	2	30
Powys	8	0	1
South Glamorgan	154	1	30
West Glamorgan	118	0	33

[1] Excluding fires confined to chimneys.

Fires[1] and casualties in multiple occupancy dwellings by brigade area, UK 1992

	Multiple occupancy dwellings		
	Fires	*Fatalities*	*Non-fatal casualties*
England and Wales	19,407	175	3,860
England	18,746	169	3,708
England: Non-Met counties	6,813	58	1,495
Avon	361	1	50
Bedfordshire	125	4	17
Berkshire	163	2	39
Buckinghamshire	118	0	19
Cambridgeshire	94	1	16
Cheshire	200	1	34
Cleveland	174	2	41
Cornwall	80	2	17
Cumbria	161	0	22
Derbyshire	131	3	36
Devon	324	0	73
Dorset	175	3	52
Durham	73	1	12
East Sussex	419	7	111
Essex	276	3	78
Gloucestershire	109	0	32
Hampshire	341	2	72
Hereford and Worcester	131	0	19
Hertfordshire	181	1	18
Humberside	293	2	69
Isle of Wight	48	0	12
Kent	339	2	80
Lancashire	540	3	137

Fires[1] and casualties in multiple occupancy dwellings by brigade area, UK 1992

	Multiple occupancy dwellings		
	Fires	*Fatalities*	*Non-fatal casualties*
Leicestershire	166	2	27
Lincolnshire	68	1	27
Norfolk	119	2	27
North Yorkshire	133	1	27
Northamptonshire	122	1	21
Northumberland	42	1	6
Nottinghamshire	276	3	60
Oxfordshire	115	1	34
Shropshire	65	0	10
Somerset	67	1	18
Staffordshire	178	1	51
Suffolk	147	0	16
Surrey	156	0	42
Warwickshire	92	1	14
West Sussex	139	0	37
Wiltshire	72	3	22
England: Met counties	11,933	111	2,213
Greater Manchester	1,675	12	454
Merseyside	863	8	245
South Yorkshire	565	3	78
Tyne and Wear	718	5	170
West Midlands	2,301	13	289
West Yorkshire	729	4	146
Greater London	5,082	66	831
Wales	661	6	152
Clwyd	85	1	35
Dyfed	66	1	19
Gwent	92	0	16
Gwynedd	57	1	9
Mid Glamorgan	96	0	17
Powys	13	0	1
South Glamorgan	162	2	35
West Glamorgan	90	1	20

[1] Excluding fires confined to chimneys.

Fires[1] and casualties in multiple occupancy dwellings by brigade area, UK 1991

	Multiple occupancy dwellings		
	Fires	*Fatalities*	*Non-fatal casualties*
England and Wales	18,687	142	3,731
England	18,054	133	3,566
England: Non-Met counties	6,438	35	1,320
Avon	379	3	74
Bedfordshire	125	1	21
Berkshire	137	1	48
Buckinghamshire	149	1	21
Cambridgeshire	111	1	38
Cheshire	226	1	38
Cleveland	140	0	26
Cornwall	66	1	19
Cumbria	109	1	17
Derbyshire	127	0	32
Devon	313	0	53
Dorset	159	0	36
Durham	77	0	17
East Sussex	351	6	60
Essex	257	2	71
Gloucestershire	127	0	18
Hampshire	308	0	57
Hereford and Worcester	130	1	30
Hertfordshire	161	2	20
Humberside	306	1	63

Fires[1] and casualties in multiple occupancy dwellings by brigade area, UK 1991

	Multiple occupancy dwellings		
	Fires	*Fatalities*	*Non-fatal casualties*
Isle of Wight	48	0	6
Kent	320	1	54
Lancashire	473	3	84
Leicestershire	145	1	20
Lincolnshire	55	0	16
Norfolk	125	0	34
North Yorkshire	121	0	18
Northamptonshire	116	0	27
Northumberland	39	0	9
Nottinghamshire	305	3	65
Oxfordshire	100	0	25
Shropshire	70	2	4
Somerset	45	0	2
Staffordshire	179	0	67
Suffolk	121	0	11
Surrey	149	1	56
Warwickshire	90	0	32
West Sussex	110	2	20
Wiltshire	69	0	11
England: Met counties	11,616	98	2,246
Greater Manchester	1,798	14	505
Merseyside	882	4	260
South Yorkshire	446	3	75
Tyne and Wear	672	4	170
West Midlands	1,944	18	237
West Yorkshire	737	4	174
Greater London	5,137	51	825
Wales	633	9	165
Clwyd	93	1	25
Dyfed	47	0	11
Gwent	77	2	17
Gwynedd	59	0	12
Mid Glamorgan	103	2	37
Powys	10	0	0
South Glamorgan	176	4	50
West Glamorgan	68	0	13

[1] Excluding fires confined to chimneys.

Fires[1] and casualties in multiple occupancy dwellings by brigade area, UK 1990

	Multiple occupancy dwellings		
	Fires	*Fatalities*	*Non-fatal casualties*
England and Wales	18,288	165	3,472
England	17,735	162	3,341
England: Non-Met counties	5,981	68	1,251
Avon	295	3	43
Bedfordshire	101	1	21
Berkshire	157	2	11
Buckinghamshire	108	3	23
Cambridgeshire	83	1	10
Cheshire	228	2	38
Cleveland	128	1	32
Cornwall	68	0	18
Cumbria	89	2	15
Derbyshire	105	1	30
Devon	292	3	85
Dorset	139	3	33
Durham	59	0	15
East Sussex	313	9	71
Essex	269	4	73
Gloucestershire	105	0	22
Hampshire	319	3	44

Fires[1] and casualties in multiple occupancy dwellings by brigade area, UK 1990

	Multiple occupancy dwellings		
	Fires	*Fatalities*	*Non-fatal casualties*
Hereford and Worcester	127	0	19
Hertfordshire	181	1	46
Humberside	293	4	65
Isle of Wight	44	0	1
Kent	272	4	42
Lancashire	437	4	96
Leicestershire	151	1	29
Lincolnshire	47	0	13
Norfolk	113	2	37
North Yorkshire	123	2	23
Northamptonshire	122	0	28
Northumberland	40	0	8
Nottinghamshire	285	1	46
Oxfordshire	130	0	28
Shropshire	49	0	8
Somerset	47	0	7
Staffordshire	129	1	32
Suffolk	98	0	16
Surrey	156	4	50
Warwickshire	89	2	20
West Sussex	143	4	32
Wiltshire	47	0	21
England: Met counties	11,754	94	2,090
Greater Manchester	1,746	12	428
Merseyside	703	5	215
South Yorkshire	410	1	70
Tyne and Wear	767	4	187
West Midlands	2,056	9	240
West Yorkshire	717	9	159
Greater London	5,355	54	791
Wales	553	3	131
Clwyd	68	0	28
Dyfed	41	0	6
Gwent	74	1	20
Gwynedd	69	0	5
Mid Glamorgan	88	1	15
Powys	15	0	7
South Glamorgan	141	1	42
West Glamorgan	57	0	8

[1] Excluding fires confined to chimneys.

Fire Services Act 1947

Mr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to modify the Fire Services Act 1947; and if he will make a statement. [5143]

Mr. George Howarth: I emphasised the importance that the Government attach to seeking improvements in fire safety in the reply which I gave to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) on 23 June, *Official Report*, column *360*. We are also considering generally whether there is a need to update and amend existing fire service legislation.

Paul Malone

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will re-examine the case of Paul Malone; if he will make a statement on the reasons for the retirement of three police officers referred to by the Police Complaints Authority in their report; and when the

Cheshire Police Constabulary were first aware of the acts referred to in the Police Complaints Authority report relating to this case. [3512]

Mr. Michael: Any re-examination of a case in which it is alleged that there has been a miscarriage of justice is now a matter for the Criminal Cases Review Commission, whose powers to refer cases to the Court of Appeal are set out in the Criminal Appeal Act (1995).

I understand that the three police officers concerned retired between June and September 1995. One officer retired on ill health grounds, the other two took normal retirement after completing 30 years' service. The matters referred to in the Police Complaints Authority (PCA) statement came to light in an investigation supervised by the PCA which was completed in August 1994.

I will draw my hon. Friend's Question to the attention of the Criminal Cases Review Commission, and will pass the information provided to the Commission for their consideration.

Fines (Motorists)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what revenue was obtained by the Treasury from fines for *(a)* speeding offences and *(b)* other traffic offences in each of the last 10 years. [5159]

Mr. Michael: The information requested is not available.

However, information available to me suggests that the amounts shown in the following table were ordered to be paid in fines in England and Wales for speeding offences and other motoring offences during the years 1986 to 1995. (Not all fines will have been paid).

As the majority of motoring offences are currently dealt with by way of fixed penalty notices, figures of the number of notices are also included in the table. From 1 October 1986, the penalty for a non-endorsable offence was set at £12 and that for an endorsable offence at £24. These penalties were raised to £16 and £32 respectively on 1 April 1990. From 1 April 1992, the penalties were again raised to £40 for an endorsable offence and for illegal parking on a red route, £30 for illegal parking in London other than on a red route and £20 for other non-endorsable offences.

Penalty charge notices issued by Local Authorities from 1994 are excluded, as the revenue is not passed to the Treasury.

Total amounts ordered to be paid in fines for motoring offences and numbers of fixed penalties issued

England and Wales 1986 to 1995

	Total amount ordered to be paid in fines for:		*Number of fixed penalty notices issued for:*			
	Speeding offences	*Other motoring offences*	*Speeding offences*		*Other motoring offences*	
	£ million	*£ million*	*Endorsable*	*Non-endorsable*	*Endorsable*	*Non-endorsable*
1986	13.2	78.7	69,639	—	35,663	4,953,335
1987	9.3	74.7	284,204	64	113,502	5,416,035
1988	10.4	79.0	340,943	822	133,887	5,699,448
1989	12.6	89.3	410,477	984	140,561	5,719,568
1990	13.5	91.9	446,993	1,387	133,765	5,716,082
1991	13.2	91.6	446,246	2,927	122,138	5,104,478
1992	12.8	90.4	456,730	3,394	104,980	4,511,922
1993	12.5	111.2	394,637	121	95,457	3,675,437
1994	11.6	118.1	472,470	—	110,446	2,991,320
1995	12.5	122.4	530,172	—	120,681	2,573,821

Figures for 1996 are not yet available.

Test Purchasing (Decriminalisation)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to decriminalise test purchasing by under-age children on behalf of the police. [4886]

Mr. George Howarth: I have been asked to reply.

The Ministerial Group on Alcopops will be considering the role of test purchases in helping to enforce the law preventing the sale of certain goods to young people.

Wildlife and Countryside Act (Offences)

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions there have been for offences under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, for each police force area for each year since its implementation. [4624]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 24 June 1997]:* The information on these offences, which involve offences against wild, captive and protected animals, birds and plants, is given in the table:

Number of prosecutions under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, 1982–1995

England and Wales

Police Force area	*1982*	*1983*	*1984*	*1985*	*1986*	*1987*	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Avon and Somerset	1		1	1	5		1	2		2	2	7	2	—
Bedfordshire		1	3	3	3		2	3	1				1	2
Cambridgeshire	1	1	1	—	3	2	1	1	5	2	2	1	1	
Cheshire			1						4		1	1		1
Cleveland										4		4	2	1
Cumbria								1	3			3	2	3
Derbyshire	5	6	7	1	5	7	5	1	1	1	6	1	—	2

Number of prosecutions under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, 1982–1995

England and Wales

Police Force area	*1982*	*1983*	*1984*	*1985*	*1986*	*1987*	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Devon and Cornwall	1	—	1	2	—	1	—	—	1	3	—	1	1	4
Dorset	—	1	3	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	1	—	1
Durham	9	8	5	12	8	3	4	4	4	9	2	—	2	—
Essex	—	3	—	8	1	1	1	2	5	3	10	4	2	—
Gloucestershire	1	—	1	—	—	—	4	—	10	1	1	3	—	1
Greater Manchester	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	4	9	1	1	—
Hampshire	—	2	4	4	1	2	2	3	5	5	1	6	2	2
Hertfordshire	—	2	3	2	2	1	—	1	3	—	3	—	—	2
Humberside	6	3	2	4	—	5	5	2	1	—	1	1	1	3
Kent	—	1	—	—	5	—	1	1	1	4	2	5	—	1
Lancashire	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	5	6	1	8	1	7
Leicestershire	4	3	2	2	2	2	6	2	1	4	2	1	4	—
Lincolnshire	5	2	1	5	4	5	4	—	1	1	—	4	2	—
Merseyside	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1	4	4	8	6	3
Metropolitan Police[1]	27	33	41	32	25	17	36	30	34	6	12	22	46	40
Norfolk	—	—	1	4	—	1	4	5	7	3	3	2	4	2
Northamptonshire	3	1	4	—	4	2	1	4	1	1	—	1	1	—
Northumbria	11	2	10	48	3	7	1	2	9	8	6	2	8	8
North Yorkshire	6	4	2	5	1	1	1	10	3	3	2	7	3	2
Nottinghamshire	3	8	5	5	4	3	2	3	4	4	—	7	4	3
South Yorkshire	7	2	9	3	1	2	1	6	4	4	1	4	3	1
Staffordshire	11	6	13	9	13	11	3	9	3	6	2	6	3	16
Suffolk	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	6	2	—	2	—	1
Surrey	1	—	1	2	1	—	—	—	2	1	3	2	—	—
Sussex	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	3	—	2	6	2
Thames Valley	2	1	2	2	2	—	3	1	3	—	3	2	2	3
Warwickshire	5	9	6	14	14	7	11	2	—	1	2	—	1	1
West Mercia	8	5	3	11	1	3	5	7	2	5	3	4	4	6
West Midlands	9	6	18	6	5	5	6	3	10	5	5	—	—	6
West Yorkshire	4	5	3	5	4	4	—	6	—	—	4	2	1	1
Wiltshire	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	2	—	2	—	—	5	2
Dyfed Powys	2	4	5	12	6	3	6	1	3	2	2	—	—	1
Gwent	10	9	11	8	11	10	5	8	1	1	2	3	4	—
North Wales	2	10	6	7	16	3	5	9	4	7	1	5	4	2
South Wales	2	1	5	5	4	—	5	8	6	4	5	2	1	7
England and Wales	148	141	183	228	155	109	134	139	159	121	105	135	130	137

[1] Includes City of London. From 1990 onwards prosecutions for offences committed under Section 13 of the Act (protection of wild plants) are not included as they are not identifiable from other summary offences.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

EU Legislation

Sir Richard Body: To ask the President of the Council what percentage of Bills introduced into Parliament in *(a)* 1976, *(b)* 1986 and *(c)* 1996 had the European Union as their legislative source; and if she will take steps to introduce a physical distinction in the publication of such Bills in the future. [4466]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: Very few Bills are introduced with the primary purpose of implementing European Community legislation, although on occasions Bills will include clauses the purpose of which is to implement European Community obligations. Detailed information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. I have no plans to introduce a physical distinction in the publication of such Bills.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Privy Council (Membership)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council what powers she has to trigger the procedure for removing a person from membership of the Privy Council; and if she will make a statement. [5584]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The enforced removal of a Privy Counsellor from membership of the Council, which has not occurred since 1921, would be a matter for The Sovereign, acting on the advice of Ministers.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Perjury

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Attorney-General what are the procedures for bringing an action for perjury against a named individual. [5503]

The Attorney-General: The question of prosecution of any individual for perjury cannot be considered until there has been a criminal investigation. It is the function of the police to investigate alleged crime and the proper course for an hon. Member having evidence showing the commission of an offence would be to place that evidence in the hands of the police.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Signals Intelligence Staff

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list for each member of each military alliance of which the

United Kingdom is part whether signals intelligence staff are *(a)* civilians, *(b)* expected to be in membership of an independent national trade union and *(c)* able to take part in a national strike unrelated to their direct conditions of employment; and in each case whether there has been such a strike in the past 20 years. [3453]

Mr. Robin Cook: Most of our NATO partners employ civilians in their signals intelligence staff. In the majority of cases these civilians have the right voluntarily to join a national trade union and some have a legal right to take strike action. None, so far as we are aware, has ever taken strike action in the last twenty years.

It is our policy not to comment on the details of the signals intelligence arrangements of other countries.

British Council and World Service

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to increase his Department's resources dedicated to *(a)* the British Council and *(b)* the World Service. [5278]

Mr. Fatchett: We are examining how we deploy all our resources, including those dedicated to the British Council and the BBC World Service, as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review. We shall submit the Review's findings to the Cabinet's Committee.

Departmental Advisers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the Special Advisers in his Department, the minister to whom each is responsible, the subjects on which they advise and the number of advisers in his Department in the year up to 1 May. [5364]

Mr. Robin Cook: David Clark and Andrew Hood are currently employed as Special Advisers in my Department. They are employed under terms and conditions based on the Model Contract for Special Advisers, a copy of which has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

David Clark is advising me on European Affairs and Security Policy.

Andrew Hood is advising me on policy related to Africa, Middle East, the Americas, Asia, international trade policy, human rights, the global environment, the arms trade and the Commonwealth.

Both work in accordance with Schedule 1 (Part 1) of the Model Contract.

There were two Special Advisers in this Department in the year up to 1 May 1997.

TREASURY

Taxpayers

Mr. Paice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of total income tax yield was paid by *(a)* the bottom 10 per cent. of taxpayers, *(b)* the median 10 per cent. of taxpayers and *(c)* the top 10 per cent. of tax payers, in the last year for which figures are available. [3351]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimates for 1997–98 are given in the following table:

Group of taxpayers per cent.	*Percentage of total income tax*
Bottom 10	[1] —
45–55	6
Top 10	46

[1] Less than 0.5 per cent.

Capital Gains Tax

Mr. Norman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the estimated revenues from Capital Gains Tax in 1995–96; and how much of this is derived from gains realised on investments of less than 12 months' duration. [3703]

Dawn Primarolo: Receipts from capital gains tax were £796 million in 1995–96. It is not yet possible to estimate the proportion due to disposals of assets held for less than 12 months.

Income Tax

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the total revenue of income tax in the top five percentiles of incomes in (i) 1978–79 and (ii) 1996–97. [3445]

Dawn Primarolo: Based on the estimated distribution of total incomes for taxpayers, the total income tax liability for the top five percentiles was £4.9 billion in 1978–79 and £25.1 billion in 1996–97.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of all adults in employment or self-employment pay *(a)* no income tax, *(b)* income tax at 20 per cent. only, *(c)* income tax at 20 per cent. and 23 per cent. only and *(d)* income tax at 40 per cent. [3354]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimates for 1997–98 are given in the table. The figures include all those with any employment or self-employment income.

Marginal rate of tax	*Percentage of total*
No tax liability	15
Lower rate	20
Basic rate	57
Higher rate	8
Total	100

The estimates are based on information from the 1994–95 Survey of Personal Incomes and population estimates from the Government Actuary's Department and are therefore provisional.

Corporation Tax

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was in each of the last five financial years the amount of corporation tax paid as a proportion of companies' pre-tax profits. [3375]

Dawn Primarolo: United Kingdom taxes on company income as a percentage of trading income before dividends calculated from calendar year national accounting aggregates are as follows:

1992: 16.4

1993: 14.1

1994: 13.7

1995: 17.1

1996: 18.7.

Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he has met representatives of pension funds and charities to discuss the impact of changes in advance corporation tax. [3744]

Dawn Primarolo: No.

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the rate of advance corporation tax on dividends. [3330]

Dawn Primarolo: The rate of advance corporation tax on dividends for the financial year 1997 is 20/80, as set out in the last Finance Act.

Mail Order

Mr. Luff: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received about the Inland Revenue's implementation of the VAT required for mail order trades; and if he will make a statement. [3551]

Dawn Primarolo: Members of the Mail Order Traders' Association (MOTA) and others have made representations to ministers about changes to VAT retail schemes announced in the last Budget by the previous Government and described in Customs and Excise Budget Notice 46/96 and in Press Notice 2 dated 26 November 1996.

MOTA members recently met senior Customs officials for further discussions. As a result, Customs announced in their Business Brief 10/97 a concession which reduces the cash flow impact on affected retailers.

Tax Policy

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the statement made in paragraph 6.73 in the Financial Statement and Budget report 1997–98 remains the objective upon which tax policy is based. [3374]

Dawn Primarolo: The Chancellor of the Exchequer will announce the Government's tax objectives at the time of the Budget on 2 July 1997.

Companies (Self-assessment)

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the timing of the commencement of self-assessment for companies. [3626]

Dawn Primarolo: For companies liable to corporation tax, the commencement of self-assessment is to be set by an appointed day, by Treasury Order. It has already been announced that the appointed day will not be before early 1999.

Value Added Tax

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the criteria his Department applies in respect of the operation of the Value Added Tax Act 1994, section 33. [4617]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 20 June 1997]:* The chief criteria which apply to the operation of section 33 of the Value Added Tax Act 1994 are that VAT should not fall as a burden on local taxation, and that local authorities should not bear tax on activities they are specifically required by statute to undertake.

Ms Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will undertake to review the decision to refuse the Scottish Environment Protection Agency an exemption in terms of the Value Added Tax Act 1994, section 33; and if he will make a statement. [4618]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 20 June 1997]:* SEPA has no power to precept on local taxation, and therefore does not meet one of the main criteria for bodies relieved by section 33 of the Act. The VAT position of SEPA and similar bodies is taken into account when setting levels of public expenditure in Scotland.

Tax Co-ordination

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to encourage the co-ordination of tax assessment and tax collection; and if he will make a statement. [3441]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue has now completed 4 years of its 10 year programme to restructure its local office network. The programme ends the distinction between separate "assessment" and "collection" offices by merging them to create new-style offices.

Securities and Investments Board (Annual Report)

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects the annual report of the Securities and Investments Board to be published. [5943]

Mrs. Liddell: A copy of the Board's report, made in accordance with Section 117 of the Financial Services Act 1986, was laid before Parliament today. The report covers the period from 1 April 1996 to 31 March 1997. Copies are now available in the Library.

Income Tax (Pensioners)

Mr. Paice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what proportion of pensioners over 65 pay *(a)* no income tax, *(b)* income tax at 20 per cent. only, *(c)* income tax at 20 per cent. and 23 per cent. only and *(d)* income tax at 40 per cent; [3352]

(2) what proportion of all adults excluding those in full-time education pay *(a)* no income tax, *(b)* income tax at 20 per cent. only, *(c)* income tax at 20 per cent. and 23 per cent. only and *(d)* income tax at 40 per cent.; [3350]

(3) what proportion of non-pensioner adults excluding those in full-time education pay *(a)* no income tax, *(b)* income tax at 20 per cent. only, *(c)* income tax at 20 per cent. and 23 per cent. only and *(d)* income tax at 40 per cent. [3353]

Dawn Primarolo: Available information for 1997–98 is given in the table. Non-pensioner adults excludes those aged 65 or over and those aged under 16. It is not possible to identify taxpayers in full-time education.

	Percentage of total		
Marginal rate of income tax	*Non-pensioner adults (age 16 to 64)*	*Pensioner adults (age 65 or over)*	*All adults (aged 16 or over)*
Not liable to income tax	37	67	43
Lower rate	15	19	16
Basic rate	42	13	36
Higher rate	6	1	5
Total	100	100	100

The estimates are based on information from the 1994–95 Survey of Personal Incomes and population estimates from the Government Actuary's Department and are therefore provisional.

Labour Force Survey

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will introduce a monthly version of the Labour Force Survey. [5375]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. David Hinchliffe, dated 26 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on the introduction of a monthly version of the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

I am responsible for deciding the form, coverage and timing of release of statistics issued by ONS, taking into account the views of customers. ONS consulted customers on the future presentation of labour market statistics; the consultation exercise was launched through an article in the *Labour Market Trends* published on 8 May. These proposals included the possibility of producing a monthly report from the LFS. Comments on the proposals should have been sent to ONS by 14 June.

The proposals set out for consultation reflect the House of Commons Employment Select Committee recommendation that more prominence should be given to the measure of unemployment which is based on the internationally agreed ILO definition.

ONS will publicly make available a response commanding wide support. The Government is committed to ensuring the widest possible acceptance of these statistics.

Labour Statistics

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to change the method of calculation for the official unemployment figures. [4106]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Bob Blizzard, dated 26 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to your recent question on what plans there are to change the method of calculating the official unemployment figures.

I am responsible for deciding the form, coverage and timing of release of statistics issued by ONS, taking into account the views of customers. ONS is presently consulting customers on the future presentation of labour market statistics; the consultation exercise was launched through an article in the *Labour Market Trends* published on 8 May. Comments on the proposals should be sent to ONS by 14 June.

The proposals set out for consultation reflect the House of Commons Employment Select Committee recommendation that more prominence should be given to the measure of unemployment which is based on the internationally agreed ILO definition.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Water Charges

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received regarding water charges for single people living alone; and if he will make a statement. [5092]

Angela Eagle: My Department has received a number of representations about discounts on water charges for single occupiers. This issue will be considered as part of the review of the water charging system which the Government announced at the recent Water Summit.

House Building

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many housing units were *(a)* built and *(b)* renovated in the year 1 April 1996 to 31 March 1997 by (i) local authorities, (ii) housing associations and (iii) local housing companies. [5065]

Mr. Raynsford: The latest available annual estimates of both house building and renovation activity by local authorities and housing associations in England are shown in the table below. Figures for housing association renovations for the March quarter of 1997 are not yet available.

There are no local housing companies registered with the Housing Corporation and so there is no information yet on their building activity.

England	*1996*
	Number of dwellings
House building (completions)	
Local authorities	530
Housing associations	26,210
Renovations (work completed)	
Local authorities[1]	329,500
Housing associations[2]	12,200

[1] Conversions plus improvements.
[2] Figures exclude hostels and shared accommodation.

Paper and Sewage Sludge

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with *(a)* the Environment Agency, *(b)* local government, *(c)* the Agricultural Development Advisory Service and *(d)* others regarding procedures for the disposal of (i) paper sludge and (ii) sewage sludge to land spraying; what changes he proposes to make in this respect; and if he will make a statement. [5090]

Angela Eagle: The previous Government set out its proposals relating to the disposal of paper sludge and sewage sludge in its response to the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution's Nineteenth Report on the Sustainable Use of Soil (CO428, January 1997). On paper sludge, the Water Research Centre and the Agricultural Development Advisory Service were commissioned to develop further the criteria that determine in what circumstances the spreading on land of those wastes exempted from waste management licensing will benefit agriculture or result in ecological improvement. The results of the study are currently being assessed by the Environment Agency which is expected to report in the near future. On sewage sludge, this Department, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Department of Health and the water industry have commissioned a review of the current controls on the use of sewage sludge as set out in The Sludge (Use in Agriculture) Regulations 1989 (as amended) and the associated Code of Practice. The review is expected to be published later in the year. Any proposals to amend the current controls will be subject to consultation.

Social Housing

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated regarding the relationship between the level of capital investment in social housing and the level of the housing benefit budget. [5294]

Mr. Raynsford: The Department has not commissioned any external studies to examine the relationship between levels of capital investment in social housing and the level of housing benefit.

However, it has constructed computer models for analysing the impact on public expenditure of different levels of local authority rents and social housing grant rates. These take account of impacts on housing benefit.

These models and related analysis will be reviewed and updated as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review announced by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 11 June, *Official Report*, column *1143*.

Green Belt

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of extension of green belt land. [5266]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government's green belt policy is set out in Planning Policy Guidance note (PPG)2. There are at present no plans to revise this guidance. The boundaries of the green belt are for local planning authorities to establish through their development plans.

Electricity Pylons

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for new planning controls on electricity pylons in rural areas. [5268]

Mr. Raynsford: Control over the erection of electricity pylons is exercised under section 37 of the Electricity Act 1989. The Government has no plans to revise the current regime, where all but the most minor overhead electricity line developments need consent from my right hon. Friend, the President of the Board of Trade. Such applications are subject to appropriate environmental assessment regulations, and account is taken of relevant policy guidance, including Planning Policy Guidance note (PPG)7 "The Countryside—Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development".

Bird Habitat (Pennine Moors)

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research has been conducted recently on the impact of agriculture and urban development on bird habitats of the West Pennine Moors. [5383]

Angela Eagle: I am not aware of any specific research on this subject which has been carried out in this area. However, a practical project run by the Standing Conference of South Pennine Authorities, due to be completed in March 1998, is aimed at developing a broad, integrated strategy for the sustainable use of the South Pennine Moors. That part of the project which relates to important bird habitats is part-funded by the European LIFE/Nature programme. Today I am announcing the clasification of the South Pennine Moors as a Special Protection Area under the EU Birds Directive.

National Parks

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has *(a)* to create new national parks and *(b)* to extend existing national parks. [5264]

Angela Eagle: The designation of new national parks in England is the responsibility of the Countryside Commission, subject to confirmation by the Secretary of State. Ministers will meet shortly with the Commission to discuss the potential for new national parks. I understand there are no plans at present to alter the boundaries of existing national parks.

Area Cost Adjustment

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to review the Area Cost Adjustment element of the revenue support grant formula. [5379]

Mr. Raynsford: The work of the Review of the Area Cost Adjustment during 1996 provided an examination of the issues, though not one which the Local Authority Associations wanted implemented for 1997–98 SSAs. The Department has recently commissioned research to examine some of the concerns of local government about the Review's proposals. It will report in July and we shall discuss with local government both the findings and the way forward on the Area Cost Adjustment.

Energy Efficiency

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what actions he is proposing to take with respect to the proportion of dwellings which are not physically capable of being made energy efficient at reasonable cost. [5152]

Mr. Raynsford: Housing authorities and other owners are responsible for determining the best course of action in respect of least energy efficient housing. This requires balanced judgements to be made about energy efficiency improvements having regard to costs and other physical and social factors. The English House Condition Survey indicated that for most dwellings, including many of those not capable of being brought up to current building regulation standards, improvement to a more moderate level of energy efficiency is likely to be the most cost effective course. Under my Department's Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme guidance is given to housing professionals, housing authorities and others on cost effective energy efficiency measures that can be undertaken in a variety of housing situations.

Students (Council Tax)

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his proposed review of the Council tax system will include the liability of students in full-time higher education who share houses with non-students. [5496]

Mr. Raynsford: The previous Government announced plans to amend the council tax liability rules to exclude students from joint and several liability for council tax. This remains the new Governments intention and we will make the necessary amendments as soon as we have an opportunity to amend primary legislation.

Homelessness Legislation

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what response he has received to the proposals for changing the homelessness legislation contained in the consultation paper that he issued on 23 May; and if he will make a statement. [5941]

Ms Armstrong: There have been about 200 responses to the consultation paper, the overwhelming majority of which unreservedly welcomed our proposals. I am today laying draft regulations that would add households owed a main homelessness duty to the groups of people to whom local authorities are required to give reasonable preference in their housing allocation schemes.

This is the first step in our plans to rebuild a proper safety net for families and vulnerable individuals who lose their homes through no fault of their own. It means that, in allocating housing, local authorities will be taking into account the experience of homelessness alongside other indicators of housing and social need.

While it is for each local authority to balance the priority for different groups of housing applicants, this measure gives authorities the potential for moving households accepted as homeless into permanent accommodation more quickly.

EU Environment Council

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of States for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the outcome of the Environment Council on 19 and 20 June. [6134]

Mr. Meacher: I represented the United Kingdom at the Environment Council which took place in Luxembourg on 19 and 20 June.

The Council reached a common position on two major directives which will reduce air pollution from vehicles. These two directives form part of the so-called "Auto-oil programme" and will set new fuel and car standards for 2000 and prospectively for 2005. The Council also reached political agreement on a directive to tackle the problems caused by the emission of volatile organic compounds from industrial and commercial processes. This directive aims to reduce emission levels by 50 per cent. and was agreed unanimously. It will now go forward for a common position once the opinion of the European Parliament has been given.

The Council further developed the Community's negotiating position for the preparatory meetings for the Third Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Kyoto, Japan, in December this year. Following the decision at the March Environment Council on a target for 2010, the Council agreed that the EU should propose that developed countries should reduce emissions of the main greenhouse gases to at least 7.5 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2005. The Council also supported my call for action by the Commission to investigate and bring forward proposals for tackling the potential problems caused by self-chilling cans.

The Council also agreed that at 9th Meeting of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol in Montreal in September the European Community should propose that consumption of methyl bromide in developed countries should be reduced to 50 per cent. of 1991 levels by 2001 and phased out in 2005, with exemptions for critical uses. The present phase out date under the Protocol is 2010.

In the debate about the Strategy prepared by the Commission to reduce the problems of acid rain in the Community I made it clear the UK strongly supported action on this though more work was needed to clarify the benefits and costs—a view shared by the majority who spoke. I also supported the designation of the Baltic and North seas as areas where the emissions of Sulphur Dioxide by ships should be controlled; I also called for this control to be extended to the west of Britain. The Council expressed general support for the proposal for the Water Framework Directive, although greater definition of the objectives to be achieved remains a common priority for the further discussions to be held under the forthcoming Luxembourg Presidency.

Conclusions were also agreed on several issues relating to the EU position for the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) in New York. The Council also agreed resolutions on the drafting, implementation and enforcement of Community Environmental Law and on Environmental Agreements. The Presidency concluded that there was insufficient support by Member States for the proposal by the

Commission for a Framework Agreement on Humane Trapping Standards (leghold traps) and therefore handed the dossier over to the Luxembourg Presidency.

New Building Projects

Mr. Charles Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what guidance his Department currently offers to *(a)* local authorities and *(b)* the Housing Corporation to ensure that they take into full account the environmental impact of new building projects; [4515]

(2) what guidance his Department currently offers to local authorities and other public transport authorities to ensure that they take into full account the environmental impact of new building projects; [4518]

(3) what guidance his Department currently offers to local police and fire authorities to ensure that they take into full account the environmental impact of new building projects. [4519]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 19 June 1997]:* My Department has issued guidance to developers and local authorities on the requirement for formal environmental assessment for certain new building projects which are likely to have significant effect on the environment. Guidance has also been issued to developers regarding the energy efficiency of new and existing buildings, more environmentally sensitive construction methods and, through the Building Research Establishment, a range of other topics concerned with minimising the environmental impact of new buildings.

Test Purchasing (Under-age Children)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to decriminalise the test purchasing by under-age children on behalf of local authority trading standards departments. [4883]

Mr. George Howarth: I have been asked to reply.

The Ministerial Group on Alcopops will be considering the role of test purchases in helping to enforce the law preventing the sale of certain goods to young people.

Air Carriers

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has made to the United States Government to ensure that British air carriers have the right to purchase a higher share of a US carrier than is currently permitted. [4633]

Ms Glenda Jackson: None. I would expect the issue of investment limits to be part of any UK/US air services negotiations when resumed.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he will take to ensure that there is equal access to American routes for British air carriers in the event of a merger between American Airlines and British Airways. [4634]

Ms Jackson: The Government is considering its approach to the resumption of aviation negotiations with the US in the light of the proposed alliance between British Airways and American Airlines. I would expect access by UK air carriers to routes both within and beyond the US to be part of any such negotiations.

Heathrow and Gatwick Airports

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he is considering for relaxation of night restrictions at Heathrow and Gatwick in connection with the use of displaced thresholds. [5399]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The use of displaced thresholds has no bearing on the night restrictions, which will continue unchanged until October 1998. Proposals for the next night restrictions regime will be put to public consultation in due course.

Road Accidents (Fire Engines)

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many accidents involving fire engines there were in Avon and Somerset; how many of these resulted in fatalities; and how many fatalities occurred in each year from 1991 to 1995. [5166]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Fire engines are not identified explicitly on the STATS 19 form completed by the police for road injury accidents. However, through the vehicle registration mark, which is recorded, it is possible to trace the vehicle type of about 80 per cent. of motor vehicles involved in such accidents. From this information, the number of accidents involving fire engines and their consequent fatalities in Avon and Somerset from 1991 to 1995, are shown in the following table.

Accidents involving fire engines in Avon and Somerset, by severity: 1991–95

Accidents

Severity	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Fatal	0	0	0	0	0
Serious	0	1	0	0	0
Slight	3	3	3	0	1
All	3	4	3	0	1

Casualties[1] in accidents involving fire engines in Avon and Somerset, by severity: 1991–95

Casualties

Severity	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Fatal	0	0	0	0	0
Serious	0	1	0	0	0
Slight	13	4	6	0	2
All	13	5	6	0	2

[1] Casualties from the fire engine and any other road user involved.

Casualties[1] in all road traffic accidents in Avon and Somerset, by severity: 1991–95

Casualties

Severity	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Fatal	163	127	86	98	129
Serious	1,021	925	860	780	837
Slight	4,829	4,670	4,786	5,081	5,591
All	6,013	5,722	5,732	5,959	6,557

[1] All road user casualties in reported accidents.

M40 (Road Improvements)

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the timetable for the proposed improvements of the A43/M40/B430. [5292]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The A43/M40/B430 improvement scheme is part of the South Midlands Network project which was included in tranche 2 of the DBFO projects announced by the previous administration last year.

Tenders were invited on 4 March but tenderers have been advised to suspend work in view of the announcement of our intention to carry out a strategic review of the Trunk Roads. Some projects, including this one, will be the subject of an accelerated review which is expected to be completed in July. You will appreciate that I cannot say what the outcome will be for this scheme.

SCOTLAND

Drugs

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the total amount *(a)* spent and *(b)* allocated by his Department on tackling problems relating to drugs in respect of (i) improving international co-operation to reduce supplies from abroad, (ii) increasing the effectiveness of police and Customs enforcement, (iii) maintaining effective deterrents and tight domestic controls, (iv) developing prevention publicity, education and community action and (v) improving treatment and rehabilitation, for (1) 1994, (2) 1995, (3) 1996 and (4) 1997. [4783]

Mr. Galbraith: Information on total Government and individual departments' expenditure on tackling drug misuse is not recorded on an annual basis. The most recently published estimates were contained in the report of the Ministerial Drugs Task Force, "Drugs in Scotland: Meeting the Challenge". This showed that an estimated £42 million of public expenditure was spent on drug-related action in Scotland in 1992–93. Updating this figure to take account of inflation and major new initiatives suggests spend of over £50 million in 1996–97 in my right hon. Friend's areas of responsibility.

To co-ordinate action against drugs, the Government will be appointing a "drugs czar", accountable to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet's coordinating committee on drug misuse, of which I am a member. These arrangements will run alongside action reflecting the particular circumstances of the position in Scotland.'

Number of persons proceeded against for possession of drugs by type of drugs offence and police force

Police force	*All drugs*[1]	*Cocaine*	*Heroin*	*LSD*	*MDMA*	*Methadone*	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other*
Number of persons proceeded against in all courts (1994)									
Central	316	0	2	13	3	0	35	284	7
Dumfries and Galloway	183	0	3	10	1	0	29	146	14
Fife	176	0	0	1	0	0	18	167	3
Grampian	679	1	19	25	21	2	103	583	17
Lothian and Borders	809	4	2	43	31	4	153	648	60
Northern	199	0	2	2	2	0	24	182	2
Strathclyde	2,076	13	91	69	37	7	262	1,703	96
Tayside	366	0	0	13	12	2	53	325	24
Scotland	4,804	18	119	176	107	15	677	4,038	223
Persons proceeded against in solemn courts (1994)									
Central	23	0	1	4	1	0	5	20	0
Dumfries and Galloway	5	0	0	2	0	0	1	4	2
Fife	7	0	0	0	0	0	4	7	0
Grampian	26	0	4	6	4	0	5	17	2
Lothian and Borders	40	4	0	11	5	1	15	22	11
Northern	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Strathclyde	133	4	19	12	7	2	27	79	10
Tayside	17	0	0	3	3	0	8	14	2
Scotland	253	8	24	38	20	3	65	165	27
Persons proceeded against in all courts (1995)									
Central	163	1	2	6	2	0	15	146	4
Dumfries and Galloway	156	0	4	2	1	0	22	139	6
Fife	262	0	4	4	10	0	36	237	2
Grampian	808	8	34	20	34	2	136	674	45
Lothian and Borders	149	0	0	3	5	0	6	140	3
Northern	126	0	0	2	1	0	12	113	2
Strathclyde	2,389	11	155	47	87	11	326	1,913	87
Tayside	264	0	5	2	11	2	42	226	12
Scotland	4,317	20	204	86	151	15	595	3,588	161
Persons proceeded against in solemn courts (1995)									
Central	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0
Dumfries and Galloway	7	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	1
Fife	6	0	1	0	0	0	1	5	0
Grampian	17	1	2	1	3	0	7	12	2
Lothian and Borders	6	0	0	0	4	0	0	4	0

Number of persons proceeded against for possession of drugs by type of drugs offence and police force

Police force	*All drugs*[1]	*Cocaine*	*Heroin*	*LSD*	*MDMA*	*Methadone*	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other*
Northern	3	0	0	1	0	0	3	1	0
Strathclyde	118	3	23	12	11	3	25	66	15
Tayside	15	0	4	1	3	2	3	12	3
Scotland	176	4	30	15	21	5	40	111	21

Source:
Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate.
Note:
[1] Columns cannot be added together since a person may be dealt with for more than one type of drug.

Speed Limits (Schools)

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to facilitate the introduction of 20 mph speed limits in the streets around schools. [5396]

Mr. Chisholm: Most schools are sited on local roads and it is therefore for individual councils, as the roads authorities responsible for road safety and traffic management, to consider in the first instance the designation of 20 mph speed limits on these roads. The Scottish Office welcomes applications for 20 mph zones and Councils were invited last year to examine the scope for introducing more such zones in their areas.

Current criteria for 20 mph zones generally require the installation of engineering measures such as road humps. The Scottish Office Development Department is now considering the scope for a number of pilot projects which would relax these criteria with the aim of giving local authorities greater freedom to introduce 20 mph speed limits in residential areas and around schools.

Residential and Nursing Care

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will assess the advantages of encouraging the development of a single type of home providing both residential and nursing care for elderly people. [5398]

Mr. Galbraith: We are considering the implications of promoting the development of single care homes.

Arts Policy

Mr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he plans to review policy on the arts; and if he will make a statement. [5343]

Mr. Galbriath: The Government keeps its policies on the arts, like its other priorities under constant review.

Water Industry

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what progress he has made in establishing a review of the Scottish water industry. [5872]

Mr. Dewar: In my Parliamentary Answer of 6 June I set out the steps I would take to fill the vacancies on the Boards of the Water Authorities. I also announced that I had asked my officials to conduct a review of the further steps I might take to strengthen local democratic control. The review will consider a wide range of options for the water authorities. It will also consider any possible implications for the Scottish Water and Sewerage Customers council.

My officials have now begun work on this review of the Scottish water industry. Through the review, they will seek a structure for the water industry that meets the Government's policy of returning the Water Authorities to local democratic control, while ensuring any solution is consistent with maintaining the essential continuity of water and sewerage services, facilitating investment, promoting efficiency, and complying, as appropriate, with the Nolan procedures for public appointments.

I have asked my officials to consult extensively with all interested parties. My officials will in particular keep the Water Authorities, the Scottish Water and Sewerage Customers Council and COSLA closely informed of progress during the review, and seek their views and advice at all appropriate points.

In addition, my officials will have regard to Government policy on the regulation of utilities, on financial accountability, and on public/private partnerships. They will take account of the need to meet statutory requirements and to secure customer service levels, and will consider international models for the structure of utility industries.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Millennium Celebrations

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will make a statement on the projects under consideration by his Department to commemorate the millennium. [5024]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Millennium Commission, which I chair, funds projects designed to mark the year 2000 and the beginning of the third millennium. Already over £1 billion of lottery money has been committed to over 100 projects on over 2000 sites across the country. By 31 December 2000, the Commission expects to have allocated £1.7 billion for its programme across the country.

This programme has three components:

The Capital Projects: £994 million has so far been allocated, on twelve landmark projects in the nine English regions and in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as on smaller, more local projects. Landmark projects include setting up the University for the Highlands and Islands; the Eden project in Cornwall which will establish one of the world's largest glass houses for extraordinary plants; the International Centre for Life in Newcastle, introducing people to the science of genetics; the Lowry Centre at Salford's waterfront which will feature a centre for Virtual Reality; and the Millennium Point in Birmingham, which will be a centre for scientific and educational excellence.

The Millennium Awards: Over £200 million will be set aside to help tens of thousands of talented people fulfil personal goals which have a wider community benefit. These will include projects managed by the Prince's Trust, The Royal Society, Mind and CSV Scotland.

The Millennium Exhibition: this will be a place of excitement and of education, opening up a "window on the future", and it will be based at Greenwich. The Commission will provide up to £400 million net, with a further £50 million of cashflow support. The Exhibition site on the regenerated Greenwich peninsula will also become the hub of a technological and educational network providing a legacy for the whole nation.

There is a range of other activity being planned for the Millennium across the nation. My Department is responsible for a Millennium Co-ordinating Group, established as a forum for a wide variety of bodies with a part to play in events to mark the Millennium. I am attending the next meeting of this Group in the coming month, and will use that opportunity to develop the themes on which we want to focus. Out of this work will come proposals for national occasions, as well as arrangements for tracking and publicising the range of other events which will be organised by people around the country.

My Department is also recommending the calling of a one-off additional Bank Holiday to mark the Millennium, and will consult with relevant interest groups about a suitable date, which we hope will be 31 December 1999. Officials are also discussing with the Churches and representatives of other faiths the holding of a number of national services during the first weekend of the year 2000.

Today we are publishing new information about how the Exhibition will take shape. I am writing to all right hon. and hon. Members about this, with information about other Millennium projects, and have placed copies in the House Libraries.

Museums

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to publish the list of designated museums. [5127]

Mr. Fisher: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced the list of designated museums and galleries on 24 June. He also announced an increase in the maximum number of museums and galleries in England that can be designated from 30 to 50. Further applications will be invited by the Museums and Galleries Commission in due course. The list of 26 designated museums and galleries is as follows:

Beamish, the North of England Open Air Museum
Birmingham Museum Service
Bowes Museum
Brighton and Hove Art Gallery and Museums
Cambridge University
—Fitzwilliam Museum
—Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology
—Whipple Museum of the History of Science
Devizes Museum
Dulwich Picture Gallery
Horniman Museum
Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust
Jewish Museum
Leeds Museums and Galleries
London University—Courtauld Institute Galleries
London Transport Museum
Manchester City Art Galleries
Manchester University
—Manchester Museum
—Whitworth Art Gallery
Mary Rose Trust
Museum of London
Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester
National Motor Museum, Beaulieu
National Tramway Museum, Crich
Oxford University
—Ashmolean Museum
—Museum of the History of Science
—Oxford University Museum of Natural History
—Pitt Rivers Museum
Reading University—Rural History Centre
Stoke on Trent Museums Service
Tyne and Wear Museums
Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere
York Museums Service.

Works of Art

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will take steps to make available to art galleries in the regions works of art that are currently in storage in London galleries and museums. [5179]

Mr. Fisher: The Government is determined to widen access to this country's cultural heritage and I commend all those institutions—not just London museums and galleries—that already lend articles in their collections, arrange touring exhibitions, and give advice and guidance. These excellent practices are nevertheless at the discretion of each institution's trustees. The Government wishes to encourage those national museums and galleries which it funds to establish closer and more supportive relationships with other museums: lending items to them is one way this can be done. But not all museums and galleries have large holdings in storage: the National Gallery's collection, for instance, is virtually all on public display.

Alcohol (Television Advertising)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what is his policy towards the advertising of *(a)* alcohol and *(b)* alcopops on television. [5323]

Mr. Fisher: All television advertising must comply with the Code of Advertising Standards and Practice issued by the Independent Television Commission. Under the code, advertising for alcoholic drinks must not be directed at people under 18 or use treatments likely to be of particular appeal to them. It must not feature persons who appear to be under 18, nor any personality who has a particular appeal to that age group. Alcohol advertising must not suggest that drinking is essential to social success or acceptance, or an essential attribute of masculinity.

The Ministerial group on Alcopops will consider all aspects of the sale and promotion of these products, including whether anything further needs to be done to regulate their advertising.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Queen's Counsel

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make his policy for applicants for silk who are turned down to be given reasons in writing for the decision. [4845]

Mr. Hoon: Applicants for silk are advised in writing of the outcome of their application, and unsuccessful applicants are given some statistical information to indicate the intensity of the competition. Unsuccessful applicants are able to meet with senior officials of the Judicial Appointments Group who are able to provide feedback on the degree of support that the individual has received and the overall tenor of the views collected in the consultation process. The Lord Chancellor has no present intention to replace this with written reasons for his decision.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Debt (Poor Countries)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the Government's policy towards the proposals by Jubilee 2000 that the unpayable debts owed by highly indebted poor countries be remitted by 31 December 2000; and what plans the Government have to encourage international support for these proposals. [5462]

Clare Short: The Government shares many of the objectives of the Jubilee 2000 campaign, including the fundamental one of the eradication of poverty in developing countries. We believe that debt relief should accompany a wider commitment by debtors to create the conditions necessary for sustainable economic growth and lasting poverty reduction. The Chancellor of the Exchequer and I are pushing for full and rapid implementation of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. We believe that much remains to be done and are pressing with urgency for the international community to provide further debt relief.

PRIME MINISTER

Policy Reviews

Mr. Luff: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list *(a)* the departmental policy reviews established by the Government and *(b)* the names of those individuals other than civil servants and ministers assisting those reviews (i) as chairman and (ii) in other capacities. [4002]

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Prime Minister how many policy reviews have been initiated since 2 May by his Government; and if he will list them by policy area. [5567]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer that I gave to the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) on 16 June, *Official Report*, columns *27–28*, which recorded the significant departmental policy reviews that we have announced.

As at 20 June, additional reviews that we have announced are:

A review of civil justice and legal aid

A review of non departmental public bodies with a view to reducing their number

A review of private finance machinery

A review of the existing code of practice on access to government information

A review of the roads programme

A review of health services in London.

We have announced the appointment of the following chairmen and members of reviews who are not civil servants or ministers:

A review of civil justice and legal aid

Chairman: Sir Peter Middleton

A review of the law relating to surrogacy

Leader:

Margaret Brazier, Professor of Law Manchester University

Susan Golombok, Professor of Psychology at City University

Alastair Campbell, Professor of Ethics in Medicine at Bristol University

A review of evidence relating to silicone breast implants

Chairman:

Professor R. D. Sturrock, Professor of Rheumatology, University Department of Medicine

Professor R. Batchelor, Professor of Immunology, Royal Post Graduate Medical School, Hammersmith Hospital (recently retired)

Professor Alan Silman, Professor of Epidemiology, Arthritis and Rheumatism Research Council

Mr. T. Milward, Consultant Plastic Surgeon, Leicester Royal Infirmary

Professor J. P. Sloane, Professor of Histopathology, University of Liverpool

Professor D. R. London, formerly Professor of Medicine, University of Birmingham

A review of breast cancer screening programme in Devon and the implications for the breast cancer screening programme as whole

Dr. M. Brindle, President of the Royal College of Radiologists

Mr. J. R. C. Sainsbury, Consultant Surgeon, Huddersfield Royal Infirmary

Mrs. G. Oliver, Cancer Nursing Specialist, Liverpool

Miss P. Cunningham, Chief Executive, Royal Marsden NHS Trust

Miss Polly Toynbee

A review of the Private Finance machinery

Malcolm Bates, Chairman of Pearl Assurance Plc and Premiere Furnell Plc

A review of film policy

Stewart Till, Co-Chairman, President of International, Poly Gram Filmed Entertainment

Charles Denton, Head of Advisory Panel on Film, Arts Council of England

Wilf Stevenson, Director, British Film Institute

Peter Broughan, Managing Director, Bronco Films

Danilka Battsek, Managing Director, Buena Vista International (UK)

Colin Leventhal, Director of Acquisition, Channel 4

Wendy Palmer, Chief Executive Officer, CiBY Sales

Richard Segal, Managing Director, Odeon Cinemas

Lynda Myles, Company Director, Prairie Pictures and Pandora Productions

Chris Auty, Managing Director, Record Picture Company

Ridley Scott, Director and Managing Director, Shepperton Studios

Dinah Caine, Director, Skillset

Duncan Kenworthy, Managing Director, Toledo Pictures

A review of health services in London

Chairman:

Sir Leslie Turnberg, President of the Royal College of Physicians

Ms Francine Bates, Assistant Director, Carers National Association

Professor Ian Cameron, Provost and Vice-Chancellor of University of Wales, College of Medicine

Professor Brian Jarman, Professor of General Practice at Imperial College/St. Mary's

Ms Denise Platt, Head of Social Services, Local Government Association

Further non-civil service and non-ministerial chairmen and members of departmental policy reviews will be announced when appointments are made.

Cabinet Office (Cash Limits)

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Prime Minister what proposals he has to change the Cabinet Office (Security and Intelligence Services) cash limit for 1997–98. [5471]

The Prime Minister: The cash limit for Class XVIII, Vote II will be decreased by £225,000 from £713,532,000 to £713,307,000. The transfer is necessary to cover support services from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Prime Minister what proposals he has to change the Cabinet Office: other services vote, cash limit or running costs limit for 1997–98. [5549]

The Prime Minister: The cash limit for Cabinet Office: other services (Class XVIII, Vote 1) will be reduced by £67,000 from £36,220,000 to £36,153,000 and the running costs limit will be reduced by £67,000 from £42,870,000 to £42,803,000.

This is to provide for the transfer of certain emergency planning functions from the Cabinet Office to the Home Office (Class VII, Vote I).

Interdepartmental Co-ordination

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Prime Minister (1) how Government policies affecting children will be co-ordinated across departments; and by whom; [5298]

(2) how Government policies affecting families will be co-ordinated across departments; and by whom. [5297]

The Prime Minister: Major policies issues affecting children and families are considered collectively in the relevant Cabinet Committees, notably the Ministerial Committee on Home and Social Affairs.

Amsterdam Summit

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Prime Minister when he expects to place in the Library a copy of the treaty agreed at the European summit at Amsterdam. [5188]

The Prime Minister: The provisional version of the Treaty of Amsterdam, prepared by the Dutch Presidency of the European Union on the basis of discussions at the Amsterdam European Council, was placed in the Libraries of the House on Friday 20 June.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral statement of 18 June, *Official Report*, column 327, concerning the proposals for the exchange rate mechanism set out in Annex II to the Presidency Conclusions at Amsterdam if, by resolution of the European Council to which Her Majesty's Government are a party, the United Kingdom has agreed to enter the exchange rate mechanism described in that resolution, even if the United Kingdom does not enter the EMU on 1 January 1999 under the Protocol to the Third Stage of the treaty of Maastricht. [5069]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 June 1997]*: No, as I said in the House of Commons on 18 June, the hon. Member's interpretation of the Resolution is not correct. The new exchange rate mechanism will, like the existing mechanism, be established by an intergovernmental agreement, on a voluntary basis. The Resolution recognises this, stating explicitly that "participation in the exchange rate mechanism will be voluntary for member states outside the euro area." There is no Treaty obligation for Member States to put their currencies into an exchange rate mechanism.

Kenya

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister when he plans to visit Kenya. [4876]

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to visit Kenya. However, I hope very much that the President of Kenya, His Excellency hon. Daniel arap Moi, will be able to come to Britain in October for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

Roisin McAliskey

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister if he will ask *(a)* the United Kingdom authorities and *(b)* the German embassy to review the article on page 4 of *Tribune*, a copy of which has been sent to him, with particular reference to the evidential issues raised therein. [5010]

The Prime Minister: No. The German request for Roisin McAliskey's extradition is currently before the United Kingdom courts. It is for them to consider whether she should be committed to await a decision on surrender by the Secretary of State for the Home Department, who retains discretion under the Extradition Act 1989 over the final decision on her return. Roisin McAliskey will have the opportunity to make representations to the Secretary of State against her return. As in all other extradition cases, it is for the courts of the requesting State to judge the evidence once an order for return has been made.

Ministerial Answers

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister if guidance on procedure for Ministers gives advice or instructions on acknowledging and appropriately dealing with answers that miss the point or make unjustified allegations. [3926]

The Prime Minister: The resolution on Ministerial accountability adopted by the House on 19 March 1997 says: "It is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity." I expect all members of the Government to act in accordance with the Resolution.

Task Forces and New Groups

Mr. Skinner: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the membership of all the task forces and new groups that have been set up since 16 June; and who will be representing race and ethnic minority interests on those groups. [5374]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 June 1997]:*

We have set up the following task forces and new groups since 16 June:

Task Force on Youth Justice

Chairman

Mr. Norman Warner, Senior Policy Adviser, Home Office

Mr. William Atkinson, Headmaster, Phoenix High School, Shepherds Bush

Mr. Jonathan Black, Magistrates Clerk, Hampshire

Ms Catherine Bowker, Youth Court Prosecutor, Brighton

Mr. Tony Butler, Chief Constable, Gloucestershire

Mr. Paul Cavadino, Penal Affairs Consortium

Ms Anne Fuller, Lay Magistrate, Inner London

Mr. Cedric Fullwood, Chief Probation Officer, Manchester

Mr. Ian Johnston, Assistant Commissioner, Metropolitan Police

Mr. David Norgrove, Marks and Spencer Plc

Ms Denise Platt, Local Government Association

Ms Teresa Reynolds, Victim Support

Ms Joan Webster, Chief Superintendent, Gwent

Mr. Geoffrey Wicks, Stipendiary Magistrate, Inner London

Mr. Andrew Williamson, Director of Social Services

Mr. John Lyon, Home Office

Mr. Tom Luce, Department of Health

Ms Jenny Rowe, Lord Chancellor's Department.

Independent advisory panel to review London's health services

Chairman

Sir Leslie Turnberg, President of the Royal College of Physicians

Francine Bates, Assistant Director, Carers National Association

Professor Ian Cameron, Provost and Vice-Chancellor of University of Wales, College of Medicine

Professor Brian Jarman, Professor of General Practice, Imperial College/St. Mary's

Ms Denise Platt, Head of Social Services, Local Government Association.

All public appointments are governed by the overriding principle of selection based on merit. Members of the task force and review groups have been selected in accordance with this principle and on the basis that their abilities, experience and qualities match the needs of the bodies in question. No individual has been appointed to represent a specific interest.

Minister without Portfolio

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister how many (i) meetings and (ii) telephone conversations he has had since 2 May with the Minister without Portfolio. [5415]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 June 1997]:* Several.

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister what responsibility the Minister without Portfolio has for *(a)* the Government's policy on freedom of information and *(b)* its policy towards the media. [5422]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 June 1997]:* My hon. Friend contributes to collective consideration of issues relating to freedom of information, and is responsible for assisting me and other ministerial colleagues in implementing and presenting government policy.

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister what responsibility he has given to the Minister without Portfolio for the Government Information Service. [5423]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 June 1997]:* My hon. Friend and other ministerial colleagues work closely with members of the Government Information Service on the presentation of Government policy.

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister which ministerial committees are attended by the Minister without Portfolio. [5425]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 June 1997]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave to the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands) on 9 June, *Official Report*, columns *302–10.*

Government Information Service

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the practice of spin-doctoring by Government press officers; and what instructions he has issued in respect of the use of this practice. [5427]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 June 1997]:* The work of the Government Information Service is governed by conventions published in its "Working Guide for Government Information Officers", a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Lockerbie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he has received in relation to Lockerbie from *(a)* Dr. Jim Swire of the British relatives, *(b)* Peter Anderson of Simpson Marwick and Company, acting on behalf of Pan Am and *(c)* David Fieldhouse, former police surgeon of Bradford. [5071]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 June 1997]:* We have received representations from Dr. Swire and a number of other Lockerbie relatives, but none from Mr. Anderson and Dr. Fieldhouse.

Ministers and Special Advisers

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister what proposals he has to extend the scope of the interests which have to be declared by Government Ministers and their special advisers. [5418]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 June 1997]:* Ministers and their special advisers are already under a comprehensive duty to ensure that no conflict arises, or appears to arise, between their public duties and any of their private interests.

Party Political Activities (Funding)

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister what safeguards exist to ensure that campaign activity and propaganda on behalf of a political party, and persons appointed for those purposes, are not paid for from public funds. [5419]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 June 1997]:* The rules on Ministerial conduct requires Ministers not to use public resources for party purposes. Civil servants are also under a duty under the terms of the Civil Service Code to ensure the proper, effective and efficient use of public money.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Low Pay

Mr. Winnick: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the setting up of the commission on low pay. [4089]

Mr. Ian McCartney: We are pressing ahead with the setting up of the Low Pay Commission. Professor George Bain was appointed on 2 June to chair the Commission and advertisements seeking suitable applicants for the Commissioners are appearing in the press this week. The Commission is expected to start work in the summer.

Mine Subsidence

Mr. Barron: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to receive the Coal Authority's second report on the administration of the coal mining subsidence damage repair and compensation scheme. [6057]

Mr. Battle: I have now received this report from the Coal Authority and have arranged for copies to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses today.

Post Office (External Financing Limit)

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the external financing limit for the Post Office for 1997–98. [6056]

Mrs. Beckett: The negative external financing limit (EFL) for the Post Office for 1997–98 has been reduced from –£330 million to –£313 million. This reflects the fact that the Post Office over-achieved its EFL for 1996–97 by £17 million, and in accordance with the existing arrangements an over-achievement of up to £30 million of one year's EFL can be matched by a corresponding reduction in the following year's figure.

Computers (Millennium Compliance)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will issue guidelines to trading standards departments giving advice on dealing with personal computers which are not millennium-compliant; and if she will make a statement. [5372]

Mr. Battle: The Century Date Change is a particularly serious issue, but I do not believe that issuing specific advice to trading standards departments is necessary.

The DTI is already taking steps to ensure that businesses and the general public are aware of the problem which has been extensively covered in the media. DTI's Information Pack on the problem already sets out general advice and sources of help.

It is for a well informed, individual purchaser to decide for himself what he needs in his own particular case. As for any other hardware or software supply issue, the details of conformability and performance are best covered in a discussion or specification and agreed by commercial negotiation. The law already provides a remedy for the purchaser of defective goods under the Sale of Goods Act 1979 and for services under the Supply of Goods and Services Act 1982, and I see no need for further measures.

Mr. Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to issue a list of millennium-compliant personal computers; and if she will make a statement. [5370]

Mr. Battle: The Century Date Change problem is a particularly serious issue, but I do not believe that to issue a list of millennium-compliant Personal Computers is the right way forward.

The IT supply industry are already well aware of the problem and many have declared the status of the products through both the media and their trade association, The Computing Services and Software Association, who maintain a "Directory of Organisations with Specialist Year 2000 Services and Products".

Key Escrow

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on her Department's policy on key escrow. [5114]

Mr. Battle: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) on 18 June, *Official Report*, column *191*.

Internet

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what use she plans to make of the Internet to make Government more open. [5099]

Mr. Battle: The Department of Trade and Industry has maintained an Internet presence since 1995 to provide a wide range of information about its activities, services and key contact points. The Department also has an Open Government page on the Internet informing the public of their rights of access under the *Code of Practice on Access to Government Information* to information it holds. The Open Government page has a direct Email link to the DTI Open Government Enquiry Point. The Department is

continually updating and expanding its Internet pages to make its activities and services more accessible to the public.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what discussions she has had with the Internet Service Providers Association to encourage self-certification by content providers. [5086]

Mrs. Roche: My Department maintains frequent contact with the Internet Services Providers Association. The Department played a key role in the development and launch of a self-regulatory system for Internet content based on existing law, known as the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) and continues to maintain contact with this organisation.

As part of its remit to help ensure that the Internet can be a safe place to work, learn and play, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) has convened an advisory board comprising representatives of content providers, children's charities, regulators from other media, ISPs and civil liberties groups, to propose a UK-focused system for rating Internet content. This system should be available within the next few months, and will help Internet users determine the nature of their and their children's experience of the Internet. IWF is also engaged in work with partners from Europe, North America and Australia with a view to creating a world forum for Internet content rating.

Arms (Manufacture and Sales)

Mr. Streeter: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has for changes in the regulation of companies manufacturing and selling arms. [982]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 22 May 1997]:* On 21 May, *Official Report*, column *72*, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs announced that we shall implement our manifesto commitment to ban the import, export, transfer and manufacture of anti-personnel mines. On 22 May, *Official Report*, column *135*, my right hon. Friend also announced an urgent review of the detailed criteria used in considering licence applications for the export of conventional arms. We shall be considering how best to take forward our other export control commitments.

Nirex

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will place in the Library a copy of the Nirex Assessment report DSAT (96) N101 prepared by A. J. Baker and R. Cummings. [1788]

Mr. Battle: The Department has not seen the report and does not have a copy of it. We understand that it is one of a large number of Nirex internal working documents. Its availability is a matter for Nirex.

Research

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what proposals she has for the funding of scientific and medical research. [1483]

Mr. Battle: The Government is committed to maintaining existing Departmental spending ceilings until March 1999, and priorities will continue to be reassessed within those ceilings. In the medium term, the overall level of funding of scientific and medical research will be reviewed as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, announced by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary on 11 June, *Official Report*, columns *1143–44*.

Gas Appliances

Mr. Wigley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the adequacy of arrangements to enforce the current regulations on the safety of gas appliances. [5435]

Mr. Battle: Safety of gas appliances is regulated by the Gas Appliances (Safety) Regulations 1995, S.I. number 1995/1629, which are made under the Consumer Protection Act 1987. Enforcement is the responsibility of weights and measures authorities in Great Britain and district councils in Northern Ireland. Local authorities determine from their own experience the effort required to effectively undertake their enforcement obligations. The powers that are in place are considered to be sufficient to enforce the current regulations, but we will of course keep them under review.

Seeboard

Mr. Burstow: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of Seeboard's investment in its local distribution network and fault monitoring system with particular reference to the Sutton and Cheam area. [5389]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 25 June 1997]:* The Engineering Inspectorate of the DTI carries out an inspection of each Public Electricity Supplier once a year, which includes a review of developments and new equipment applications in relation to maintaining compliance with the Electricity Supply Regulations 1988 as amended. An inspection of installations in the Sutton and Cheam area was conducted in 1992. I am not aware of any change in policy by Seeboard as to the means of satisfying its obligations to comply with the Electricity Supply Regulations 1988 as amended.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will seek a report from the chairman of Seeboard on the reasons for the interruptions of supply over the last six months in the Hurstcourt Road and Fairlands Avenue areas of the Sutton and Cheam parliamentary constituency. [5390]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 25 June 1997]:* The Engineering Inspectorate of the DTI is aware of several unrelated failures in electricity supply this month in the Sutton and Cheam area, some of which have been due to damage to underground cables caused by other parties, and is investigating the circumstances with Seeboard. The local Office of Electricity Regulation is aware of recent events in the area.

HEALTH

Human Cloning

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he will take to ensure that human cloning will not be allowed to occur in the United Kingdom either directly or through research material obtained from other countries. [4141]

Ms Jowell: We regard the deliberate cloning of human individuals as ethically unacceptable. Under United Kingdom law, cloning of individual humans cannot take place whatever the origin of the material and whatever technique is used.

Research into some serious inherited illnesses in humans, such as some forms of encephalomyopathy, cardiovascular disease and type II diabetes, can take place using cloning techniques. However, where such research involves the use of human embryos it is strictly controlled under the terms of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 which would require a licence to be issued by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority.

Corticosteroids

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received in respect of the adverse affects of corticosteroids; what plans he has to hold a public inquiry into their handling and use; and if he will make a statement. [4172]

Mr. Milburn: Correspondence has been received from members of Group Action into Steroid Prescribing, a group of people who have suffered adverse effects associated with corticosteroid treatment.

Corticosteroids have been fully evaluated for quality, efficacy and safety by the United Kingdom Licensing Authority. The product information including patient leaflets describes the effects of these medicines. It is for prescribing doctors to decide on the risks and benefits of treating individual patients according to their clinical judgment. Ensuring that patients are appropriately informed about the possible effects of drug treatment is a matter of concern and practice in this area is currently under consideration.

Rothbury Community Hospital

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the review of the private finance initiative in the NHS will entail delays in the design and tender process for the Rothbury community hospital. [4239]

Mr. Milburn: The proposals for the redevelopment of hospital and community facilities in Rothbury are being considered in conjunction with a Private Finance Initiative scheme at Cheviot and Wansbeck NHS Trust involving the reorganisation of the trust's acute services. Under the review of PFI in the NHS all major acute hospital schemes currently testing for PFI will be prioritised. I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on 10 June 1997 at columns *427–28*. In future all major acute capital projects—whether funded under the PFI or using public capital—will be prioritised in accordance with health service needs. These prioritisation exercises will not apply to small-scale acute schemes such as the project at Cheviot and Wansbeck NHS Trust and non-acute schemes such as that for Rothbury currently testing for PFI. Proposals for improving the procurement process under PFI for all types of schemes will be put forward in the near future.

Dental Services

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Health to which dental practices the £40,000 allocated to Berkshire Health Authority in 1996–97 to improve access to NHS dentistry was allocated, to what other purposes the money was allocated and what assessment he has made of the extent to which the disbursements met the criteria set out in the health authority's bid. [5073]

Mr. Milburn: Berkshire Health Authority was awarded £40,000 as extra funding under the National Health Service Dentistry Access Fund 1996–97. The funding is being used solely to meet the aims identified in the health authority's bid.

The practices receiving these funds are all based in the health authority area.

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the North and Mid Hampshire Health Authority has allocated to dental practices the grant which it received from the National Health Service Dentistry Access Fund; and how it has been distributed. [5255]

Mr. Milburn: Yes. The funding is being used to meet the aims identified in the bid.

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the £40,000 allocated to Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority for dental practices has been distributed; and to what extent this distribution has reflected the criteria set out in the bid. [5489]

Mr. Milburn: Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority was awarded £40,000 as extra funding under the National Health Service Dentistry Access Fund 1996–97. The bid from the health authority met the criteria which were set out in the directions sent to all health authorities.

Urban Food Growing Projects

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will establish a review into the public health implications of community-led urban food growing projects in deprived areas; and if he will make a statement. [4888]

Ms Jowell: In 1996, the National Food Alliance (NFA) and the Sustainable Agriculture Food and Environment (SAFE) Alliance published a report, Growing Food in Cities, which aimed to promote the benefits of urban agriculture in the United Kingdom. The report argued that increasing urban agriculture would yield a range of benefits including community development, economic development, education, environmental improvement, health, leisure and sustainable neighbourhoods.

The Government welcomes any initiatives such as local food growing projects which empower local communities and help them to address their own health needs. It recognises that in deprived urban areas in particular, food

growing projects can make an important contribution to improving not only the food supply but also quality of life.

The Department is currently funding the National Food Alliance and the Health Education Authority to produce a database of projects which aim to assist people on low incomes to eat more healthily. The database has already been launched nationally and will be fully operational later this year.

Yellow Card System

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his Department's latest estimate of the proportion of adverse reactions reported under the yellow card system. [4922]

Ms Jowell: The proportion of all adverse reactions reported under the yellow card system is not known, as there is no means of knowing the total number of adverse drug reactions.

Smoking

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he proposes to take to discourage smoking *(a)* generally and *(b)* with particular reference to under 20-year-olds. [4987]

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how he intends to achieve "The Health of the Nation" targets to reduce the prevalence of smoking among 11 to 15-year-olds. [5318]

Ms Jowell: The Government's strategy on smoking will be set out in detail in a White Paper later this year. This Paper will reflect the deliberations of the summit of national and international experts in the field of smoking reduction to be held on 14 July.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) of 10 June, *Official Report*, column *425*, if he will make a statement on the number of 16 to 24-year-olds who smoke. [4986]

Ms Jowell: Smoking levels in this age group, particularly among young women, are a matter of serious concern. How best to influence the various age groups will be a topic for study at the summit of national and international experts in the field of smoking reduction to be held on 14 July.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he plans to increase awareness among the public of the dangers of passive smoking. [5085]

Ms Jowell: Reports published in this country by the Independent Scientific Committee on Smoking and Health (1988) and the Royal College of Physicians (1992) and by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (1993) have set out the health risks associated with passive smoking.

The Scientific Committee on Tobacco and Health has been asked by the Chief Medical Officer to review the latest evidence and its report is expected later this year.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the costs to the national health service of the use of tobacco. [5172]

Ms Jowell: Treatment costs to the National Health Service are not available on a year by year basis. Based on 1990 figures, the Health Education Authority's report "The Smoking Epidemic—A Prescription for Change", estimated that the annual cost to the NHS of treating smoking related diseases is £610 million.

Erb's Palsy and Brachial Plexus Injuries

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the merits of recording incidents of *(a)* Erb's palsy and *(b)* brachial plexus injuries. [5009]

Ms Jowell: Erb's palsy and brachial plexus injuries are, fortunately, rare occurrences. Most babies with Erb's palsy recover spontaneously within a few months. We will continue to support initiatives by the professional organisations which aim to minimise the risk of Erb's palsy and brachial plexus injuries. Professionals providing maternity care should monitor the incidence of such cases. The Government believes local monitoring is the best approach and the collection of information centrally would not assist in preventing occurrences.

Internet

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what use he plans to make of the Internet to make Government more open. [5102]

Ms Jowell: The Department continues to update and expand its web site. The site already includes extensive information about the Department's work and publications as well as a wide range of guidance for business on regulation. Some key publications, such as the NHS Performance Guide, the Chief Medical Officer's quarterly updates, and "The Health of the Nation" briefing pack, appear in full.

Development of the site is driven by the need of government to be more accessible and accountable, taking account of feedback from its users and of the principles set out in the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. Additions planned for coming months include the full text of departmental circulars (from 1 July), guidance on emergency planning, a wider range of official statistics, and the 1997 NHS Performance Guide. Statistics received from the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency show that weekly page accesses to the Department's site have increased from just under 2,000 in June 1995 to over 12,000 in June 1997. Managers of over 250 other sites have set up links to that of the Department of Health. The Department will continue to improve the organisation of the site and its coverage.

Special Advisers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the special advisers in his Department, the minister to whom each is responsible, the subjects on which they advise and the number of advisers in his Department in the year up to 1 May. [5351]

Mr. Dobson: The Department has currently appointed one paid special adviser, Mr. Joseph McCrea, who is responsible to me.

He is employed under terms and conditions based on the model contract for special advisers, copies of which have been placed in the Library. Mr. McCrea is advising me on all Departmental subjects in accordance with Schedule 1 (Part 1) of the model contract.

There were two special advisers employed during the year up to 1 May 1997.

Wharfedale General Hospital

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will examine the time so far taken to draw up plans for the redevelopment of Wharfedale General Hospital; and if he will ensure that the process is completed within a reasonable time scale. [5279]

Mr. Milburn: This is a matter for Leeds Health Authority and the United Leeds Teaching Hospitals National Health Service Trust in consultation with the National Health Service Executive which has asked the trust to submit a revised outline business case for consideration. This will give the opportunity for a fresh assessment of the choices for the proposed development.

Infertility

Ms Keeble: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what research his Department is funding into the causes of and treatment for infertility; and if he will make a statement; [5387]

(2) what research his Department is funding into the causes of treatment for infertility; and if she will make a statement. [5387]

Ms Jowell: The main agency through which the Government supports medical and clinical research is the Medical Research Council (MRC) which receives its grant-in-aid from my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade. In 1995–96, the latest year for which figures are available, the Council spent some £2.4 million on research related to infertility and fertility in general in both males and females. Much of the research is carried out at the Council's Reproductive Biology Unit in Edinburgh.

In addition, there is also research within the National Health Service Executive. The Trent Research Scheme, run by Trent Regional Office of the NHS Executive, is funding two relevant studies. These are:

Psychological outcome and adjustment to parenthood in couples conceiving through IVF treatment (1 February 1997 to 31 January 1999; £23,690);

The incidence of sex chromosome aneuploidy in spermatozoa from men with semen parameters necessitating intracytoplasmic sperm injection (1 March 1997 to 28 February 1998; £26,000).

Obesity

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how he intends to achieve "The Health of the Nation" targets to reduce the percentage of men aged 16 to 64 years who are obese. [5319]

Ms Jowell: The Health Survey for England 1995 shows that the prevalence of obesity increased from 13 per cent. for men and 16 per cent. for women in 1993 to 15 per cent. and 18 per cent. respectively in 1995. Obesity is more common with increasing age up to 64 years in men and 74 years in women, and is more common in manual than non-manual social classes. Men in Social Class III (manual) and women in Social Class IV have the highest rates (17.6 per cent. and 24.1 per cent. respectively). Obesity is a long-term problem and needs a long-term strategy. We will continue to support the action on obesity and obesity-related illness which addresses:

(a) prevention of increasing fatness in the whole population

(b) the particular problems of high risk groups e.g. those already overweight

(c) treatment of those who are already obese.

Work initiated by the Nutrition Task Force and the Physical Activity Task Force is directed towards helping people to reduce the fat content of their diets and encourage physical activity.

The role of physical activity in helping to maintain a healthy weight is well recognised. The "Active for Life" campaign, which is funded by the Department and run by the Health Education Authority, promotes the value of increased physical activity. The campaign targeted people aged 16 to 74 in its first year and will continue to run to 1999. As part of this campaign we are also looking at physical activity and young people. To this end, an expert conference was convened last week to establish a consensus on the optimum levels of physical activity for school aged children and young people.

GP Fundholding

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total financial surpluses currently held by GP fundholders. [5174]

Mr. Milburn: The total accumulated level of savings available to general practitioner fundholders as of April 1996 was £188 million.

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if GP fundholding receives the same degree of audit scrutiny as other elements of the NHS and public sector services. [5281]

Mr. Milburn: Like all other National Health Service bodies, general practitioner fundholders are under a statutory requirement to have their accounts audited annually by the Audit Commission. In addition, their accounts (as part of those of the local health authority) are open for scrutiny by the National Audit Office and by internal auditors of the local health authority. These are similar to the arrangements that apply elsewhere in the public sector.

Strategic Planning

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to review the current arrangements for strategic planning within the NHS. [5175]

Mr. Milburn: The arrangements for strategic planning in the National Health Service will be reviewed in the context of work on replacing the internal market.

NHS Trust Mergers

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to review the possibilities of mergers between adjacent NHS trusts. [5176]

Mr. Milburn: Any proposals to merge National Health Service trusts will be considered on their merits. Mergers must lead to improved services for patients.

Repetitive Strain Injury

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of repetitive strain injury were identified in England in (i) 1995 and (ii) 1996. [5303]

Ms Jowell: The Department of Health does not collect data on repetitive strain injuries (some of which are known as upper limb disorders). However, evidence from a survey on occupational ill health, carried out for the Health and Safety Executive as a supplement to the 1990 Labour Force Survey, suggests that in the year around 110,000 people in England and Wales believed that they had upper limb disorders caused by work. A new survey of work related illness was made in 1995–96 and the full results will be available early in 1998. Data are also available on some conditions which are prescribed under the Industrial Injuries Scheme. This is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security.

New Building Projects

Mr. Charles Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance his Department currently offers NHS trusts and health authorities to ensure that they take into full account the environmental impact of new building projects. [4517]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 19 June 1997]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply the Minister for London and Construction, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), gave him today.

Policy on environmental issues is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, which produces guidance for local authorities to use when considering planning applications by NHS Trusts for new building projects. The Department of Health fully supports the Government's commitment to promoting policies to sustain the environment.

NHS Estates, an Executive Agency of the Department of Health, has issued "A strategic guide to environmental policy for General Managers and Chief Executives" and Health Facilities Note 11 "Environmental management in healthcare", with the aim of advising NHS trusts how to produce sound policies to reduce environmental damage. The Agency has also published reports on energy saving measures in hospitals.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Health and Social Services Staff

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* Roman Catholics and *(b)* Protestants are employed by (i) the Southern area health and social services board and (ii) the Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust. [4268]

Mr. Worthington: The latest available information on numbers and religious composition of staff employed by the Southern Area Health and Social Services Board is contained in the Fair Employment Commission's Seventh Monitoring Report which was published in March 1997 and contains a summary of 1996 Monitoring Returns. That report indicated the position to be as follows:

	Number
Protestant	925
Roman Catholic	1,103
Non-determined	189
Total	2,217

There is no information available yet on the Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust which came into operation on 1 April 1996.

Drugs

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the total amount *(a)* spent and *(b)* allocated by her Department on tackling problems relating to drugs in respect of (i) improving international co-operation to reduce supplies from abroad, (ii) increasing the effectiveness of police and Customs enforcement, (iii) maintaining effective deterrents and tight domestic controls, (iv) developing prevention publicity, education and community action and (v) improving treatment and rehabilitation, for (1) 1994, (2) 1995, (3) 1996 and (4) 1997. [4782]

Mr. Ingram: Information on total Government expenditure on tackling drug misuse in Northern Ireland is not recorded on an annual basis. Estimated expenditure for the 1993–94 financial year for Northern Ireland was published in May 1995 White Paper "Tackling Drugs Together" as part of the UK expenditure figure of £526 million. Figures for the calendar years 1994 and 1995 are not available.

The most recent available estimates for Northern Ireland were published on 18 March 1997 in the NI Affairs Committee Report: Illicit Drug Use in NI and refer to the 1995–96 financial year. They show that at least £7.17 million of expenditure in 1995–96 could be directly attributable to drug prevention and treatment programmes, public information campaigns and enforcement activities across the province. Similar costings were incurred for delivering these same services for 1996 and 1997.

However, in 1996 and in addition to the £7.17 million, an extra £0.5 million was secured for each of the next three years to develop a NI Drugs Campaign, which will be used to fund a broad range of drugs services including a public information campaign, educational training and materials for schools, drug handbooks for drug professionals, and a drugs research strategy, and to create four drugs co-ordination teams.

Internet

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what use she plans to make of the Internet to make government more open. [5096]

Mr. Murphy: Business Development Service (BDS) of the Department of Finance and Personnel provides an Internet publishing service for NI government information.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will use the BDS Web Publishing service to augment the significant base of information which already exists on the Northern Ireland Civil Service Web Server.

Under the Deregulation Initiative, more than 250 forms have been made available to the public for printing, completion and submission to NICS Departments and Agencies.

The NICS World Wide Web service holds over 12,000 pages of Government information on topics as diverse as updates in progress in the Northern Ireland Multi-Party talks to a database of commercial property valuations. Currently, the number of accesses per month to the NI Government Web Service exceeds 450,000.

BDS has recently established a secure connection that will facilitate Internet e-mail messaging to all NI public servants.

The Web information is accessible at: http://www.nics.gov.uk using any publicly available web browsing software.

Human Rights

Mr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she expects to receive the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights' review of fair employment and equality; and if she will make a statement. [4421]

Marjorie Mowlam *[holding answer 24 July 1997]:* The Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights (SACHR) published its report today, copies have been placed in the Library. I am grateful to SACHR for producing this report. I shall study the recommendations with the greatest of care.

WALES

Council House Repairs

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the average number of jobs created when a local authority modernises a council house; and if he will make a statement. [3151]

Mr. Win Griffiths: I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible and place a copy of my reply in the Library of the House.

Speech Therapy

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what assessment he has made of the coordination between the local education authority and health authority of speech therapy services for schoolchildren in Flintshire; [4457]

(2) if he will consult parents, teachers and governors concerning the future of speech therapy services in schools; and if he will make a statement; [4455]

(3) what is his policy on speech therapy in schools; [4453]

(4) what plans he has to improve speech therapy services to schoolchildren. [4454]

Mr. Hain: Health authorities are primarily responsible for providing speech therapy services, including services to children. If a health authority cannot provide speech therapy for a child whose statement of special educational needs identifies a need, the local education authority has to ensure the provision is made in view of its duty to maintain statements. Health authorities are statutorily required to comply with requests from LEAs unless the request is unreasonable and subject to sufficient resources. Welsh Office guidance to LEAs and health authorities has drawn attention to this duty. Copies of the guidance has been placed in the Library of the House.

The Welsh Office has introduced new measures to improve the recruitment of speech therapists. The Department has also introduced two new core indicators for health authorities which will help measure the service they provide for children with statements.

Neither my right hon. Friend nor I have made an assessment of co-ordination in Flintshire. I understand that representatives from six North Wales LEAs met the North Wales Health Authority recently to discuss the future planning of speech therapy services in the area.

We have no immediate plans to consult parents, teachers and governors. However, we shall be assessing the effectiveness of the initiatives over the coming months and reviewing the position more generally.

Smoke Detectors

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the local councils which *(a)* have and *(b)* have not installed smoke detectors in their housing stock. [4748]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Twenty-one local authorities in Wales have fitted, or are in the process of fitting, smoke detectors in all of their housing stock. Details are in the following table:

Installation of smoke detectors in local authority housing in Wales

Local authority	*Smoke alarms in all stock*	*Type of alarm*
Isle of Anglesey County Council	Yes	Mix of battery and mains
Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council	Yes	Battery
Bridgend County Borough Council	Yes	Battery
Caerphilly County Borough Council	Yes	Mains
City and County of Cardiff	Yes	Battery
Carmarthenshire County Council	Yes	Mix of battery and mains
Ceredigion County Council	Yes	Battery
Conwy County Borough Council	Yes	Battery
Denbighshire County Council	Yes	Mix of battery and mains
Flintshire County Council	Some (in accommodation for the elderly)	Mains
Gwynedd County Council	Yes	Mix of battery and mains

Installation of smoke detectors in local authority housing in Wales

Local authority	*Smoke alarms in all stock*	*Type of alarm*
Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council	Yes	Battery
Monmouthshire County Council	Yes	Mains
Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council	Yes	Mix of battery and mains
Newport County Borough Council	Yes	Battery
Pembrokeshire County Council	Installation in all properties will be completed in 1997–98	Mains
Powys County Council	Yes	Mix of battery and mains
Rhondda, Cynon Taff County Borough Council	Yes	Battery
City and County of Swansea	Yes	Mix of battery and mains
Torfaen County Borough Council	Installation in all properties will be completed in 1998–99	Mains
Vale of Glamorgan County Borough Council	Installation in all properties will be completed in 1998–99	Mains
Wrexham County Borough Council	Yes	Mix of battery and mains

Internet

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what use he plans to make of the Internet to make Government more open. [5097]

Mr. Ron Davies: My Department has maintained an Internet Site on the CCTA server since 1995 which at present contains hospital performance information. A pilot site for the Welsh Office Industry and Training Department was set up in 1995 and this contains mainly Industry related information.

My Department has recently completed a study of how it can make best use of the Internet to provide a wide range of information about its activities, services and regulatory guidance.

My Department is now implementing, with the CCTA, a new on-line Internet Communication System. This will enable us to quickly expand our current Internet presence to make Welsh Office information more accessible through electronic communication.

Agri-environment Programme

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he expects to announce new proposals on the agri-environment programme in Wales. [5301]

Mr. Win Griffiths: My right hon. Friend hopes to make a statement on proposals for the future of the agri-environment schemes in Wales at the Royal Welsh Show.

Conservation (Cardigan Bay)

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list his conservation objectives for the Cardigan Bay Special Area of Conservation. [4537]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The legislation requires the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) to advise other relevant authorities as to the conservation objectives for the site. The CCW is in the process of preparing this advice, and discussions on the subject are taking place with the other relevant authorities. The process must be completed as soon as possible after the site is formally agreed between the European Commission and the UK Government. The relevant Directive requires this agreement to take place by June 1998.

Popular Schools Initiative

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his future plans for the Popular Schools Initiative in Wales. [5497]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend and I plan to honour commitments for the 23 projects successful under Phases 1 and 2 of the Popular Schools Initiative. There will, however, be no third phase.

University Hospital of Wales

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received concerning car parking charges at the University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff; and what consultations he has had with the chairman of the University Hospital of Wales Healthcare NHS Trust concerning these charges. [5500]

Mr. Win Griffiths: One. Charges for car parking are a matter for the UHW Healthcare NHS Trust. The charges for the new multi-storey car park under construction will be capped for three years, and any subsequent rises will have to be in line with local parking rates and inflation.

DEFENCE

HMS Dreadnought

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what information was provided by the manufacturers as to the maximum level of radiation workers could safely be exposed to when the Royal Navy took delivery of the nuclear reactor for HMS Dreadnought; and if such information is retained by the Royal Navy. [4788]

Mr. Spellar: The Royal Navy took delivery of HMS Dreadnought containing the first UK Submarine nuclear reactor in 1963. While manufacturers are not responsible for advising my Department on the levels to which its radiation workers might be exposed, radiation surveys by Vickers (VSEL), the ship builder, established that the radiation levels on HMS Dreadnought were within the limits specified, based upon the recommendations of the International Commission for Radiological Protection in being at the time. This information is held by VSEL but was and is available to the Royal Navy.

Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* the sponsors of the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme and *(b)* their individual contributions since 1992. [5013]

Mr. Spellar: We are profoundly grateful to the sponsors of the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme, British Aerospace, Rolls-Royce and Vickers, which have since 1992 each contributed £14,250, and to Sir Neil Thorne for the very considerable moral and financial support he has lent the scheme since its inception in 1989.

Atomic Weapons Establishment

Mr. Brian Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the AWE sites at Aldermaston and Burghfield to be licensed under the Nuclear Installations Act 1965. [6055]

Mr. Spellar: I am pleased to announce that the Chief Inspector of Nuclear Installations has granted a licence, effective from 1 July 1997, to the AWE management contractor Hunting-BRAE Ltd. to operate the AWE sites at Aldermaston and Burghfield. The two sites will thus be brought within the same regulatory regime as civil nuclear sites and will be regularly inspected by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate. This will provide independent assurance that nuclear-related activities at AWE are carried out safely and pose no threat to the workforce, the public or the environment.

Eurofighters

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the statement by the Minister of State for Defence Procurement that the number of Eurofighters to be ordered will be included as an item for consideration by the Defence review represents Government policy. [5495]

Mr. Spellar: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear on 16 June, *Official Report*, column *81*, it is our intention to order Eurofighter according to the conditions and numbers previously announced. We are committed to the purchase of 232 Eurofighters. Eurofighter might be a cost effective replacement for the Harrier GR7, although no decision on this needs to be taken yet. Decisions taken during the Defence Review could affect this.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

EU Agriculture Council

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Luxembourg on 23 and 25 June; and if he will make a statement. [5942]

Dr. John Cunningham: The Council reached agreement, Spain voting against, on a package of measures covering the CAP support prices and aids for the 1997–98 marketing year, the penalties to be applied when arable base areas are exceeded, and the rate of set-aside to apply to the 1998 crop.

On prices and aids, the agreement largely maintained the status quo, in advance of negotiations on reform of the major regimes, which are anticipated to start in the Autumn. However, monthly increments for cereals intervention and sugar storage refunds were cut by around 9 per cent. to reflect interest rate changes. The Council agreed to address the important question of over-compensation of arable farmers for past support price cuts in the context of the forthcoming discussions on reform of the arable regime.

In response to requests from me and several other Ministers, the Council agreed in principle that the set-aside rate for the 1998–99 marketing year should be maintained at 5 per cent. It invited the Commission to submit a proposal accordingly, as soon as possible. The proposal to amend the regulations concerning the arable penalties system was adopted with minor amendments—notably, to suspend the application of penalty set-aside for a further year—and requests from several Member States for measures which would have weakened or complicated the system were successfully resisted.

I argued for, and secured, a further commitment from the Commission to propose new measures to safeguard the welfare standards of breeding pigs without requiring them to be unloaded at staging points during journeys. This will help secure the high health status of these valuable animals when they are transported on long international journeys.

On BSE, I reported to the Council the measures I have recently announced to the House following SEAC's advice that the controls on specified bovine material should be extended to imports and that the UK should extend its controls on sheep and goat offal. In reply, Commissioner Fischler supported my call for a Community-wide solution to this problem and urged Member States to support the measures he has recently tabled on specified risk material.

The Council also unanimously endorsed an Italian application for approval of a state aid to agricultural co-operative members and adopted by qualified majority (Germany voting against) a Directive concerning maximum pesticide residue levels in food.

Pig Exports

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many pigs were exported for *(a)* breeding, *(b)* slaughter and *(c)* further fattening (i) during 1996 and (ii) to date in 1997; and if he will make a statement. [4867]

Mr. Rooker: Information on the numbers of pigs escorted in 1996 and 1997 can be obtained in the form requested only at disproportionate cost. Official Overseas Trade Statistics show that approximately 340,000 pigs were exported from the United Kingdom in 1996 and approximately 34,450 were exported up to the end of March 1997. More recent figures are not yet available. These figures remain provisional and subject to amendment.

Exotic Animals

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to review the current regulations on the transportation of exotic animals; and if he will make a statement. [4607]

Mr. Morley: The welfare of animals during transport to, from, and within the EU is regulated by directive 91/628, as amended by directive 95/29. In Great Britain these provisions are implemented by the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997 which was made on 10 June 1997. These regulations were introduced after consultation with interested parties when the subject was reviewed.

Pesticides

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research or data his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the presence of pesticides currently banned in the United Kingdom as residues on imported food; and if he will make a statement. [5163]

Mr. Rooker: The Working Party on Pesticide Residues analyses 3,000 to 4,000 samples annually of a wide range of imported and UK-produced commodities. Each sample is analysed for up to 100 different pesticides, including those which have been banned in the UK. This monitoring programme cost £2 million in 1996–97. In recent years, although residues of banned pesticides have occasionally been detected, none has exceeded internationally agreed safety levels.

The full results of the Working Party's monitoring are published annually and the report for 1996 is expected to be published in September 1997.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his policy with regard to the release of brand names with the results of pesticide residue tests. [5164]

Mr. Rooker: The Working Party on Pesticide Residues undertakes a large surveillance programme and publishes the results in an annual report with includes details of the countries of origin of samples where this can be determined. More generally, I am currently reviewing ways to improve reporting the results of all surveys including the release of brand names. I intend to make a further statement in the near future.

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ensure that chemicals used to spray crops do not damage the environment. [5190]

Mr. Rooker: Only approved pesticides can be advertised, sold, supplied, stored or used. Applicants for approvals must show that their products pose no unacceptable risks to humans, animals or the environment before approval will be granted. The Registration Handbook outlines the comprehensive data which must be submitted in support of an application. These data are scrutinised by the independent experts of the Advisory Committee on Pesticides before a recommendation is made to Ministers in the five Government Departments responsible for pesticides.

All approved pesticide products are subject to routine review but may be reviewed at any time if any evidence emerges concerning their safety.

RSPCA Freedom Foods

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment his Department has made of the RSPCA freedom foods initiative. [5184]

Mr. Morley: This Government wholeheartedly welcomes any positive contribution to the maintenance and improvement of welfare standards for farm animals. Detailed requirements of schemes such as the RSPCA's Freedom Foods are a matter for the organisations concerned.

Farm Animals (Cruelty)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the number of prosecutions for cruelty to farm animals in each of the last five years; and if he will list the powers under which such prosecutions may be made. [5182]

Mr. Morley: The Reports of the Chief Veterinary Officer have recorded the following figures for prosecutions relating to the welfare of animals on farm in Great Britain in which the State Veterinary Service (SVS) has been involved:

1992: 120
1993: 111
1994: 112
1995: 127
1996: 105.

The figures are for prosecutions on which the State Veterinary Service has worked in liaison with the police, local authorities and other agencies.

The figures for 1992–94 are for successful prosecutions; those for 1995 and 1996 are for prosecutions initiated.

The relevant powers are contained in the Protection of Animals Act 1911, the Protection of Animals (Scotland) Act 1912, and the Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968.

Food Labelling

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about the steps he is taking to ensure clearer labelling on food. [5202]

Mr. Rooker: The Government believes that consumers have a right to receive information about the foods they buy and we are taking a number of steps to improve on that presently.

On mechanically recovered meat, we recently succeeded in getting the rest of Europe to agree that this should be separately and specifically declared on the label. We have also sought comments from interested parties on the operation of the nutrition labelling rules and invited suggestions for improvements to take forward in Brussels. Finally, we have recently announced our intention to press in Europe for all food to be labelled if they contain genetically modified material.

New York Dressed Poultry

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the health hazards posed by the sale of New York Dressed poultry, and the evidence on which his list is based. [5313]

Mr. Rooker: The Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food considered the risks posed by New York Dressed (NYD) poultry in its "Report on Poultry Meat" published in 1996. NYD birds are sold uneviscerated and with the head and feet attached. These birds present a particular hazard due to the risk of leakage of faeces and resulting contamination of the surface of the birds. If evisceration is carried out in the kitchen, there is also the risk of faeces or intestinal contents from ruptured intestines cross-contaminating other foods.

Prevention of Damage by Pests Act

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to review the operation of the Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949. [5157]

Mr. Morley: The results of the 1993 National Rodent Survey did not provide evidence to suggest that a change in rodent control policies was needed. A further survey has been carried out, the results of which will be available later this year, and the situation will be reviewed in the light of the results of this survey.

Over 30 months Scheme

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to alter the amount payable to farmers involved in the over 30 months cattle scheme to take account of fluctuation in the value of the green pound. [5341]

Mr. Rooker: None. The sterling value of payments made for cattle slaughtered under the over 30 months scheme still represents a good return in comparison with the market price of clean beef in the UK and cull cow prices in some other member states.

Quarantine Kennels

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to publish the list of kennels that have agreed to comply with the code of practice on welfare standards. [5583]

Mr. Rooker: Information on the quarantine premises that comply with the voluntary code of practice for the welfare of dogs and cats in quarantine premises will be included in the literature sent out to prospective importers of pet dogs and cats after all the premises that have undertaken to comply with the code have been inspected by the State Veterinary Service. The majority of these inspections have been carried out.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to review further the provision of care and welfare standards at quarantine kennels. [5582]

Mr. Rooker: The voluntary code of practice for the welfare of dogs and cats in quarantine premises was published in March 1995. It will be kept under review.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to commission a risk assessment and economic audit to determine the costs and benefits of quarantine and alternative systems. [5579]

Mr. Rooker: I shall consider whether a risk assessment and economic audit is appropriate as the review of the rabies quarantine regulations progresses.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many owners of quarantine kennels have *(a)* agreed to abide by the voluntary code of practice on welfare standards, *(b)* indicated they will not comply and *(c)* not yet responded. [5580]

Mr. Rooker: Seventy-three owners of quarantine premises have agreed to abide by the voluntary code of practice. Three have indicated that they do not wish to comply with the code at this stage and two have not yet responded to the invitation.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many quarantine kennels which have agreed to abide by the code of practice on welfare standards have been inspected by the State Veterinary Service. [5581]

Mr. Rooker: Sixty-three.

Multi-Annual Guidance Programme

Mr. Lawrie Quinn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a report on progress on implementing the MAGP III fishing industry provisions; and if he will make a statement. [4916]

Dr. John Cunningham *[holding answer 24 June 1997]:* Fleet reduction targets under the third fisheries Multi-Annual Guidance Programme (MAGP III) relate to the period from 1 Janaury 1992 to 31 December 1996. The European Commission is still considering figures submitted by Member States in order to draw up a final assessment of what was achieved. The position as reported by the previous administration is set out in the table below.

Segment	*MAGP III Objective (GRT)*	*Position at end 1996 (GRT)*	*Percentage reduction in GRT to meet Objective*	*MAGP III Objective (kW)*	*Position at end 1996 (kW)*	*Percentage reduction in kW to meet Objective*
Over 10 metre vessels						
Pelagic gears	24,323	27,800	12.5	82,168	71,876	-14.3
Beam trawls	19,004	22,103	14.0	91,140	117,616	22.5
Demersal trawls and seine	59,470	64,534	7.8	316,399	332,337	4.8
Nephrops	18,725	11,176	-67.5	106,477	69,183	-53.9
Lines and nets	13,134	13,615	3.5	67,364	51,972	-29.6
Shellfish mobile	8,394	8,418	0.3	51,232	54,724	6.4

Segment	MAGP III Objective (GRT)	Position at end 1996 (GRT)	Percentage reduction in GRT to meet Objective	MAGP III Objective (kW)	Position at end 1996 (kW)	Percentage reduction in kW to meet Objective
Shellfish fixed	5,264	5,331	1.3	35,895	43,999	18.4
Distant water	10,204	12,423	17.9	22,384	26,853	16.6
Non-active, non-TAC	0	0	—	0	0	—
Under 10 metre vessels	22,697	20,851	–8.9	28,6154	286,367	0.1
Total	181,216	186,251	2.7	105,9212	105,4927	–0.4

A negative percentage figure represents the over-achievement of the Objective.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Reading and Writing

16. **Dr. Kumar:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the number of children who left primary school in 1996 able to read and write to their chronological age. [4107]

Mr. Byers: Fifty-eight per cent. of pupils reached level 4 and above—the level expected for 11-year-olds—in English in the 1996 national curriculum tests.

Welfare-to-work Task Force

17. **Mr. Stinchcombe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the remit of the welfare-to-work task force. [4108]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The role of the task force is first, to ensure that the design of the new deal takes full account of the requirements of employers and the wider community, second, to harness the energy and commitment of all sections of society, and particularly the business community, behind the new deal, and finally, to keep the Government informed of the way the proposals are working on the ground and advise on the resolution of any problems which arise.

28. **Jacqui Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the members of the welfare-to-work task force. [4120]

Mr. Smith: We have appointed Sir Peter Davis to lead the new deal advisory task force. The Government are now working with him to ensure that membership of the task force consists of people representing employers and other interests who are vital to the success of our initiative. The list will be made public in due course.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the remit of the welfare-to-work task force. [4115]

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the remit of the welfare-to-work task force. [4117]

Mr. Alan Howarth: One of our most urgent priorities is to help unemployed people move from welfare to work. We intend to work in partnership with the business community and other key interests to offer unemployed people help in returning to sustained employment. The aim of the new deal advisory task force, which is headed by Sir Peter Davis, will be to ensure that employers and other key sectors are committed to the success of the initiative. The role of the task force is threefold:

(a) to ensure that the design of the new deal takes full account of the requirements of employers and the wider community;

(b) to harness the energy and commitment of all sections of society, and particularly the business community, behind the new deal;

(c) to keep the Government informed of the way the proposals are working on the ground, and advise on the resolution of any problems which arise.

Higher Education (Access)

18. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to improve access to higher education for young people from low-income families. [4109]

Dr. Howells: We are committed to widening opportunities for all individuals to fulfil their potential and we shall be considering very carefully what the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education has to say about improving the under-representation of lower socio-economic and certain other groups in higher education.

Key Stage 2

19. **Dr. Tony Wright:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans she has to modify the assessment tests at key stage 2. [4110]

Ms Estelle Morris: We are awaiting advice from the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority on the shape of the 1998 assessments before making decisions.

School Standards

20. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his main policy priorities for raising standards in schools. [4111]

Mr. Byers: Raising standards in schools is a central priority of this Government. That is why we have set up the Standards and Effectiveness Unit. We have also set clear new national targets for higher standards of literacy and numeracy by the time children leave primary school age 11.

Early-years Development Plans

21. **Mr. Chope:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the progress of local authorities in preparing interim early-years development plans. [4112]

Ms Estelle Morris: Progress is very encouraging. A majority of local authorities have told us they intend to submit interim plans by the deadline of 1 July.

22. **Mr. Touhig:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the early-years development plans will cover early-years education and child care. [4113]

Ms Morris: Yes. We have made clear the need to integrate these services.

Nursery Voucher Scheme

26. **Mrs. May:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the arrangements for providing and funding nursery education for four-year-olds following the abolition of the nursery voucher scheme. [4118]

32. **Mr. Walter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for the replacement of the nursery voucher scheme; and what are the financial implications of these plans. [4124]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government's plans were set out in my right hon. Friend's reply to a question from the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) on 22 May, *Official Report*, column *128* and in the Department's letter of 22 May to Chief Education Officers, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.

As early-years development plans take effect, nursery education places occupied by eligible four-year-olds will be funded through local education authorities from the resources previously available for vouchers.

Disability Discrimination Act

27. **Mr. Burstow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when his Department's review of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 will be completed. [4119]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Our manifesto commits us to supporting "comprehensive, enforceable civil rights" for disabled people. We are consulting interested parties on the best way to achieve this and we shall develop proposals in the light of our discussions.

An announcement about how we intend to proceed will be made after we have had an opportunity to consider the views put to us at these initial meetings.

University of Industry

30. **Mr. Canavan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement about the role of his Department in the plans for a university of industry. [4122]

Dr. Howells: The Department is taking the lead in developing the framework for a university for industry.

We are taking urgent steps to bring together a range of interests from across and outside government to agree the way ahead on the university for industry's development. An announcement is expected very soon.

Cooking Skills

31. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will increase the priority accorded to cooking skills within the national curriculum; and if he will make a statement. [4123]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Secretary of State has agreed not to make any changes to the national curriculum before the year 2000. The new Qualifications and Curriculum Authority will be offering advice on any changes that might be made and he will consider the issue of cooking skills alongside that advice.

Long-term Unemployment

33. **Mr. Reed:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to move long-term unemployed people from welfare into work. [4125]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Under our new deal for young unemployed people aged 18 to 24, we intend to offer opportunities to take jobs, and to gain relevant education, training and work experiencee. We also intend to offer employers an incentive of £75 per week to recruit people aged 25 or over unemployed for two years or more.

The Employment Service will work in partnership with the business community, voluntary organisations and other bodies to ensure the initiative is effective.

Child Care

29. **Mr. Ivan Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to promote the integration of early-years education and child care. [4121]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made clear the importance we attach to the development of a coherent programme for the education and care of young children that, along with after school provision, helps parents who want to work juggle work and family life. We regard the integration of education and childcare as central to this. Good quality child care should be based on learning and child development, and should form part of a wider family learning programme. To achieve this local authorities will establish early-years forums to draw up early-years development plans which will show how these and other services for families can be brought together. Young children's services providing education and child care support, early-years development plans, after school homework clubs funded by the midweek lottery and the work already being delivered by the out of school child care Initiative, and meeting the needs of children, parents and employers, will form key elements of our overall approach.

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to integrate early-years education with child care. [4431]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made clear the importance we attach to the development of a coherent programme for the education and care of young children that, along with after school provision, helps parents who want to juggle work and family life. We regard the integration of education and child care as central to this.

Good quality child care should be based on learning and child development, and should form part of a wider family learning programme. To achieve this local authorities will establish early years forums to draw up early years development plans which will show how these and other services for families can be brought together. Young children's services providing education and child care support, early-years development plans, after school homework clubs funded by the midweek lottery and the work already being delivered by the out of school child care initiative, and meeting the needs of children, parents and employers, will form key elements of our overall approach.

International Labour Organisation Conference

34. **Mr. McNulty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the outcome of the recent International Labour Organisation conference. [4126]

Mr. Andrew Smith: This year's International Labour conference was a successful event in which the UK played a positive and constructive part. When I addressed the conference, I set out the Government's commitment to the promotion of basic labour standards and our support for the ILO Director-General's vision of universal respect for fundamental human rights in the workplace. There was unanimous approval of my announcement concerning the restoration of trade union rights at GCHQ.

Literacy Summer Schools

35. **Mr. Cawsey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools are participating in the pilot literacy summer schools. [4127]

Mr. Byers: I launched the initiative on 3 June with 29 schools and am delighted to say that this initiative has recently been expanded to a total of 50 schools.

Student Debts

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of higher education students who will be unable formally to graduate in 1997 from higher education institutes because of debts owed to those institutes; and if he will make a statement. [4114]

Dr. Howells: None. The information requested is not available centrally.

New Deal

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to announce details of his new deal for young people. [5186]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Details of the new deal for young people will be announced shortly.

Nursery Education

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what support will be available for parents of four-year-olds currently using private or voluntary sector providers where their local education authority does not have an approved interim early years development plan. [5197]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 24 June 1997]:* Where a local education authority does not have an approved interim early-years development plan and parents currently using private or voluntary sector providers wish to continue doing so for the coming Autumn and Spring terms, then those parents will be entitled to certificates of eligibility. These certificates will cover fees up to £366 per term for up to five sessions of education per week each lasting at least two and a half hours.

Jobfinder's Grants

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many jobfinders' grants were paid in 1996–97; and at what cost. [5438]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Christopher Pond, dated 26 June 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about how many Jobfinder's Grants were paid in 1996–97; and at what cost. This is something that falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

During 1996–97, 17,300 Grants were paid at a cost of £3.8 million.

I hope this is helpful.

Public Utilities

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much *(a)* British Telecom, *(b)* the water and sewerage companies, *(c)* the regional electricity companies, *(d)* the electricity generators, *(e)* British Gas, *(f)* BAA and *(g)* Railtrack received in funding for training from the Further Education Funding Council budgets in (i) 1995–96 and (ii) 1996–97; and if he will make a statement. [5577]

Dr. Howells: This information is not centrally available.

Construction Industry

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans the Government have to review the role and function of the Construction Industry Training Board and the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board. [6136]

Dr. Howells: Against the background of the established practice of carrying out quinquennial policy and financial management reviews of non-departmental public bodies, my Department will conduct a thorough review of the Construction Industry Training Board and the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board during 1997–98.

The first stage of the review will have the following terms of reference:

1. To review the functions of the Boards, and the likely need in the future of these functions.

2. To consider whether some or all of the functions can be better performed through other means.

3. To review the efficiency and effectiveness of the Boards in carrying out their functions.
4. To consider the powers, terms of reference, constitutional status, membership and activities of the Boards.
5. To report the outcomes of the reviews by late September 1997.

The study is now underway and I would welcome comments form interested parties. Comments, which may be made public unless respondents specifically request otherwise, should be sent by 30 July 1997 to:

Mike Beck
Department for Education and Employment
Industry Training Board Quinquennial Review Team
N207
Moorfoot
Sheffield
S1 4PQ.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Poverty

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will list the methods by which Her Majesty's Government assesses the level of poverty existing in the United Kingdom. [867]

Mr. Bradley: The policies of the previous administration led to poverty and social division in our society. The Government is committed to mounting a concerted attack against the worklessness which is causing social and economic inequality, and welfare dependency.

Information on those with low incomes is available in the Government Statistical Service publication "Households Below Average Income". This annual report seeks to measure potential living standards derived from goods and services financed from disposable income. It provides a range of statistics monitoring the characteristics of people at various points in the income distribution, and describes how changes in income over time have affected particular groups. Complementary information is provided on possession of consumer durables and on household expenditure.

Households Below Average Income was last published in November 1996, and a copy is in the Library.

Child Care

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals she has to implement a national child care strategy; and if she will make a statement. [3055]

Ms Harman: I will be working closely with my colleague, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, whose Department has responsibility for developing and implementing a National Child Care Strategy. This Strategy will match provision to the requirements of the modern labour market and help parents, especially women, to balance family and working life. The availability of good quality and affordable child care not only benefits women, it has wide-ranging benefits for the whole community. Most important of all, it benefits children.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has already made clear the importance he attaches to the development of a coherent programme for the education and care of young children that, along with after school provision, helps parents who want to work. The integration of education and child care is central to this programme, ensuring that children as well as parents benefit from provision.

Local Exchange Trading Systems

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will review the role of LETS within areas of high unemployment. [4880]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The Government believes that work is the best form of welfare for people of working age. Our Welfare to Work objectives are to provide work incentives, to reduce poverty and welfare dependency and to strike a new balance between rights and responsibilities. A programme of monitoring and evaluation is under way to enable us to ensure that Jobseeker's Allowance contributes to achieving our objectives.

In addition to this major evaluation exercise, we shall also keep the individual benefit rules, including the treatment of the Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS), under active consideration as we develop our plans.

Social Fund (Appeals)

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will reform the administration of the Social Fund to enhance the rights of appeal given to claimants. [5498]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The Social Fund is made up of two parts—the regulated and discretionary schemes. The regulated scheme is based on rules of entitlement. Payments are not cash limited and are subject to the appeal procedures relevant to all regulated Social Security benefits.

Decisions on discretionary Social Fund payments are made from a cash-limited budget. These payments are subject to a special review procedure specifically designed to suit the cash limited and discretionary nature of the scheme. Applicants who are dissatisfied with the discretionary decision already have access to immediate redress locally, and a further right of review by the Independent Review Service if they are still dissatisfied.

The Social Fund review process provides a comprehensive system of redress which is quick, fair and reasonable. It is well suited to a cash-limited discretionary scheme. We have no plans to integrate it into the Social Security appeals system.

Child Support Agency

Ms Keeble: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security in what proportion of cases being dealt with by the CSA, the parent with care of the child is not receiving benefit, described under section 6 of the Child Support Act 1991 *(a)* in total, *(b)* by region and *(c)* by county. [4381]

Mr. Keith Bradley: We believe that all children are entitled to the support of both parents wherever they may live. Children should be supported by the taxpayer only when their parents are unable to do so. The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mrs. Faith Boardman to Ms Sally Keeble, dated 25 June 1997:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the proportion of CSA cases where the parent/person with care is not in receipt of benefit as described under section 6 of the Child Support Act 1991.

At 28 February 1997, of the 579,180 live and assessed cases recorded on the Child Support Computer System, 11% of parents/persons with care were not in receipt of income support or other prescribed benefits. The table attached shows a breakdown by region, a breakdown by county is not available.

I hope this is helpful.

Parent/Person with care not in receipt of Income Support or other prescribed benefits

Live and assessed caseload—28 February 1997

	Number of cases	*Not in receipt of IS/FamC/DWA*	
		Number	*Per cent.*
Great Britain	579,180	65,000	11
North	40,660	4,180	10
Scotland	45,620	4,080	9
Yorkshire and Humberside	54,200	4,700	9
North West	74,280	9,180	12
East Midlands	35,680	3,840	11
West Midlands	52,320	5,320	10
East Anglia	18,540	1,900	10
Wales	37,200	5,180	14
South East	135,060	16,700	12
South West	47,720	6,480	14

Regional totals do not sum to the Great Britain total as some postcode data are sufficient to allow a regional breakdown.
We do not record the above statistics at levels lower than by region.

Family Credit

Mr. Heppell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action her Department is taking to reduce the backlog of claims for family credit. [3947]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The efficient administration of family credit is central to the Department's measures to help people move from welfare into work. We will streamline services to provide better, simpler and more efficient services to clients. The administration of family credit is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. John Heppell, dated 25 June 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what action the Department is taking to reduce the backlog of claims for Family Credit (FC).

The workload forecast for 1997/98 is that 1.7 million FC claims will be received, which equates to an average of over 32,000 claims weekly. Additionally, renewal claims peak in April and October so it is not unusual for the FC Unit to have approximately 65,000 claims at various stages of assessment at any given date. FC Unit Managers prepare for such peak periods by implementing various short term measures, which include the redeployment of staff and the use of overtime.

These measures were used to ensure less than 46,000 claims were awaiting processing at the end of March. The FC Unit were therefore in a position to handle the higher number of claims expected in April. The total number of claims received in April was 174,686. The Unit's effective management of the workload ensured that the temporary backlog in April was reduced to less than 57,000 claims outstanding, as at 16 June.

The Benefits Agency aims to clear all claims accurately and on time. Details of the clearance targets for claims, the actual achievement to the end of 1996/97 and the achievement to the end of May 1997 are shown in the attached Annex.

I hope that this reply assures you of the efforts being made by staff and Management within the FC Unit to ensure that any claims awaiting a decision are kept to a minimum at all times.

Family credit targets

Percentage

Target	*Secretary of State clearance 90 per cent. of Faster Claims in 5 days*	*Management primary clearance 60 per cent. of claims in 13 days*	*Management secondary clearance 95 per cent. of claims in 42 days*
1996–97 achievement	91.9	76.3	98.9
1997–98 achievement to end of May	89.7	72.0	99.1

Figures are provisional and subject to change.
The Faster Claims target relates to newly employed and first time applicants, many of whom have been in receipt of income support or job seekers allowance.
The Management targets relate to all claims.

Benefits Agency Medical Services

Mr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what is the average annual income of a medical practitioner employed by the Benefits Agency Medical Services on *(a)* a full-time and *(b)* a part-time basis; and if he will make a statement; [4428]

(2) how many medical practitioners employed by the Benefits Agency Medical Services have voluntarily resigned from their posts in each of the past three years; what assessment he has made of the reasons for such resignations; and if he will make a statement; [4429]

(3) how many medical practitioners currently employed by the Benefits Agency Medical Services have worked on a sessional basis as members of disability appeals tribunals in *(a)* Strathclyde, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* England and Wales in each of the past three years; of those employed how many work wholly or mainly on disability living allowance claims; and if she will make a statement. [4430]

Mr. Field: Modernising the Social Security system is a key priority of the Government. We will streamline services to provide better, simpler more efficient services to clients. I wish no discourtesy to the hon. Gentleman but the administration of the Benefits Agency Medical Services is a matter for Peter Mathison, its Chief Executive. I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Norman A. Godman, dated 25 June 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions about medical practitioners employed by the Benefits Agency Medical Services (BAMS).

The average annual income for a medical practitioner in full time employment with BAMS is currently £42,159. For medical practitioners in part-time employment, the figure is £26,767.

The number of staff who have resigned during the past three years and the reason for their resignation is shown at Annex 1.

The number of medical practitioners currently employed by BAMS, who have also worked on a sessional basis as members of Disability Appeal Tribunals (DATs), is not available for 1994/95 or 1995/96. Details for 1996/97 are shown at Annex 2.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Annex 1: Number of BAMS medical practitioners who have resigned

1994–95		1995–96		1996–97	
Reason	*Number*	*Reason*	*Number*	*Reason*	*Number*
In wrong job	0	In wrong job	5	In wrong job	5
Ill health	3	Unhappy with management	1	Looking after relatives	1
Other	0	Other	3	Other	5
Not known'	1	Not known'	4	Not known'	13
Total	4	Total	13	Total	24

Figures are provisional and subject to change.
' Indicates doctors who have chosen not to give their specific reasons.

Annex 2: The number of medical practitioners currently employed by BAMS, who have also worked on a sessional basis as members of Disability Appeal Tribunals (DATS)

Location	*1996–97*
Strathclyde	Nil
Scotland	Nil
England and Wales	'2

Figures are provisional and subject to change.
' These medical practitioners have not recently sat on DATs and neither works mainly on DLA claims.

Special Advisers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will list the special advisers in her Department, the Minister to whom each is responsible, the subjects on which they advise and the number of advisers in her Department in the year up to 1 May. [5360]

Ms Harman: Two special advisers, John McTernan and Liz Kendall, are employed in this Department under terms and conditions based on the model contract for special advisers, a copy of which is available in the Library. Both are responsible to me as Secretary of State for Social Security and they advise me on the full range of my ministerial duties in accordance with Schedule 1 (Part 1) of the Model Contract.

One special adviser was employed in the Department in the year to 1 May.

Widowers' Benefits

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to introduce widowers' benefits on the same basis as widows' benefits. [4812]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (Mr. Gorrie) on 23 June, *Official Report*, column *413*.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 27 June 1997

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Privy Council Members

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council what criteria are used to select individuals for membership of the Privy Council. [5621]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: Appointment to the Privy Council is an exercise of the prerogative. Appointments are made by Her Majesty The Queen on the advice of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. A range of factors are taken into account. Those appointed mostly comprise Ministers, other Parliamentarians and members of the judiciary.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people aged 17 to 25 years are claiming the jobseeker's allowance in Portsmouth; and what this figure is as a percentage of all those in the age group. [4741]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 27 June 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question asking how many people aged 17 to 25 years are claiming the Jobseeker's Allowance in Portsmouth and what this figure is as a percentage of all those in the age group.

The numbers of claimants are collated by two age groupings: 17 to 24 and 25 to 29 year olds. The table below show the number of claimants at the April 1997 count.

In the Parliamentary Constituency of Portsmouth South, the numbers were:

Claimants	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Aged 17–24	771	288	1,059
Aged 25–29	608	133	741

In the Parliamentary Constituency of Portsmouth North, the numbers were:

Claimants	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Aged 17–24	572	193	765
Aged 25–29	344	79	423

In the Local Authority Area of Portsmouth the numbers were:

Claimants	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Aged 17–24	1,255	450	1,705
Aged 25–29	901	201	1,102

Unfortunately, a percentage of 17–24 year unemployed claimants as a proportion of the entire workforce in that age group cannot be given, due to the age criteria used to compile the Population Census survey. However, I give below figures of all young people by available age group:

Portsmouth South—Workforce

Age group	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
16–17	862	808	1,670
18–19	1,414	1,169	2,583
20–24	4,816	4,604	9,420
25–29	4,933	4,558	9,491

Portsmouth North—Workforce

Age group	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
16–17	1,348	1,246	2,594
18–19	1,402	1,359	2,761
20–24	3,793	3,825	7,618
25–29	4,224	4,479	8,703

Portsmouth Local Authority Area

Age group	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
16–17	1,907	1,746	3,653
18–19	2,484	2,203	4,687
20–24	7,919	7,736	15,655
25–29	8,439	8,212	16,651

Source: 1991 Census of Population.

I hope this is helpful.

Employment Service

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will place in the Library a copy of the documentation which has been issued to the staff of the Employment Service relating to the measures that they should take to encourage the long-term unemployed to opt for Government training programmes. [5388]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Brian H. Donohoe, dated 27 June 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about the documentation issued to Employment Service staff relating to the measures they should take to encourage the long term unemployed to opt for government training programmes. This is something that falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

Guidance on all aspects of dealing with jobseekers following the introduction of the Jobseeker's Allowance was issued to Employment Service staff in October 1997 and amendments issued when appropriate. Copies of the guides are held in the Library.

It may be helpful if I explain that, in addition to regular fortnightly reviews, Employment Service advisers interview all jobseekers at six monthly intervals to review their situation, their work goals and the steps they have been taking to find work. As part of this they assess each jobseeker's needs, identify any barriers to employment and consider what options are available to help them back into work. Advice is tailored to meet an individual's needs and could include information about jobs; employment programmes such as Jobclub; and training opportunities, such as Training for Work.

In addition to the advice and information provided during advisory interviews and at fortnightly reviews, information about a range of opportunities is available in the "Just the Job" leaflet which is held in all Jobcentres.

I hope this is helpful.

School Meals

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the average charge per pupil for school meals in the last year for which figures are available. [5439]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department does not collect this information centrally.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Visas

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for changes in the procedure for applying for a visitor's visa; and when he plans to introduce an appeal procedure. [5093]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Our manifesto commits us to providing a streamlined system of appeals for visitors denied a visa. We are examining the options for doing this.

Police and Security (Indonesia)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will identify by name, rank and number those Indonesian military, security, police and paramilitary police personnel invited by the *(a)* Home Office and *(b)* the Association of Chief Police Officers to attend the International Police and Security Expo 97. [5699]

Mr. Michael: Neither the Home Office nor the Association of Chief Police Officers is aware of any invitation being issued to Indonesian personnel to attend the International Police and Security Expo 97.

Alcopops

Ms Gisela Stuart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received concerning alcopops. [5615]

Mr. George Howarth: As Chairman of the Ministerial Group on Alcopops, I have received letters from and am holding meetings with the licensed trade and other interested organisations about underage drinking, industry self-regulation and options for Government action. I expect to make an announcement in July.

WALES

Welsh Office Overseas Trade Services

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assistance the Welsh Office Overseas Trade Services section has given to the individual companies who are exhibitors at the International Police and Security Expo 97. [5698]

Mr. Hain: The Department is not aware of the companies who are exhibiting at this exhibition. Assistance has not been given in respect of this particular event.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will ensure that assistance from the Welsh Office Overseas Trade Services section is not provided for the sale of military, security and police equipment to overseas regimes which do not respect the human rights of their citizens. [5695]

Mr. Hain: The Government will not permit the export of arms and related equipment to regimes which it is thought will use them for internal repression. That commitment is reflected in my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry's decisions on individual export licence applications.

The Welsh Office's Overseas Trade Services section has no role in the consideration of export licence applications.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment the Welsh Office Overseas Trade Services section has given to the organisers of the International Police and Security Expo 97. [5697]

Mr. Hain: None.

Fibre-optic Cabling

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with *(a)* the chairman of the Welsh Development Agency and *(b)* the chairman of the Development Board for Rural Wales, with regard to the strategy each is adopting for the fibre-optic cabling of Wales; what assistance he has made of the compatibility of the strategies of the two bodies; and if he will make a statement. [5819]

Mr. Hain: Neither I nor my right hon. Friend have as yet met the Chairman of the Welsh Development Agency or the Chairman of the Development Board for Rural Wales to discuss the specific issues referred to.

Both bodies are however working alongside the Department in an effort to ensure that all areas of Wales have access to modern telecommunications infrastructure.

The hon. Member raised the issue of broadband telecommunications in Wales during the adjournment debate on 18 June 1997, and I undertook to write to him fully on the matter. I shall be doing so shortly and will arrange for a copy to be placed in the Library.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he is taking to ensure that the establishment of fibre-optic cable links with Ireland gives rise to similar links to north-west Wales; and if he will make a statement on his Department's policy for extending cable links to the rural areas of Wales. [5818]

Mr. Hain: I am concerned to ensure that all areas of Wales benefit from a good telecommunications infrastructure. However, the question of individual links is a matter for the telecommunications companies concerned.

I will write to the hon. Member on this matter and place a copy of my reply in the Library.

Llanelli/Dinefwr NHS Trust

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he proposes to fill the vacancies on the board of the Llanelli/Dinefwr NHS Trust. [5645]

Mr. Win Griffiths: My right hon. Friend has issued invitations to serve on the board to those concerned.

Hospital Trusts

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will publish the names of the members of the steering group which is to be established to advise on the reconfiguration of the hospital trusts in Wales. [5646]

Mr. Win Griffiths: I have not made a final decision on the individuals who will comprise the steering group but, when the decision has been made, I will publish their names.

Freight Facilities Grant

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the amounts and the recipients of grants awarded in Wales under the Freight Facilities Grant scheme. [5623]

Mr. Hain: The information requested is given in the following table:

Year	*Recipient*	*Grant Award £*
1976	BP Ltd., Baglan Bay, West Glamorgan	110,000
	Tunnel Cement Ltd., Bangor	75,165
1977	Batchelor Robinson Steel and Chemical Ltd., Llanelli	12,385
	Gloda Distributors (South Wales) Ltd., Swansea	60,000
1978	Duport Steels Ltd., Llanelli	1,844,000
	Isis Link (William Cory Ltd.,)	125,750
	Fords, Bridgend	1,114,000
	Gower Chemicals, Swansea	30,325
	A.J. Williams, Merthyr	65,000
1979	Aberthaw Cement, Barry	732,834
1980	Associated Octel, Amlwch, Anglesey	52,000
1982	Steel Supply Co., (Western) Ltd., Skewen	34,000
1983	Tunnel Cement Ltd., Padeswood	149,500
	Railease Ltd.,	587,250
	National Coal Board, Deep Navigation Colliery Treharris	33,704
	National Coal Board, Wernos Central Washery, Ammanford	130,025
	National Coal Board, Gwaun Cae Gurwen	193,718
	National Smokeless Fuels Ltd., Aberaman Phurnacite	64,350
1984	National Fuel Distributors Ltd.,	20,500
	Blue Circle Cement, Aberthaw Works	343,000
1985	National Coal Board, Marine Colliery	154,648
1986	Camarthen Warehousing Ltd.,	239,000
1987	National Smokeless Fuels Ltd., Aberaman	209,784
1987	British Coal, Merthyr Vale Washery	104,076
	Kronospan, Chirk	238,500
1993	Ryan Mining Ltd.,	3,898,281
1997	Associated British Ports, Newport	677,890

Transport Grant

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he intends to announce the outcome of the recent review of the Transport Grant arrangements; and if he will make a statement. [6278]

Mr. Hain: I have considered the advice contained in the joint Welsh Office/Welsh Local Government Association working party report into the Transport Grant arrangements and I have introduced two changes for the 1998–99 settlement, for which bids have been invited today:

- support will be reduced, from a rate of 100 per cent., to 80 per cent. for cost increases incurred once a scheme has been accepted for a start of works;
- integrated transport package schemes costing over £1 million, will be eligible for support.

I believe it is essential to obtain the best value from the Transport Grant resources made available. While I accept it is difficult to predict the costs of major construction projects with complete accuracy, I am concerned by the rate at which local authority Transport Grant schemes have increased in cost in recent years compared with our own Trunk Road projects. The generous grant arrangements do not help in this respect. My proposals will provide a strong incentive for authorities to control costs, ensuring both the best possible use of available resources and cost-effective solutions to transport problems. This in turn will help release resources to help tackle the growing number of local authority projects awaiting support.

Transport Grant will continue to be available at a rate of 100 per cent. (50 per cent. grant and 50 per cent. supplementary credit approvals) up to the estimated project cost accepted at start of works. Therefore, schemes whose costs do not increase during construction will continue to receive full support, as will projects which have previously been accepted for a start of works, which are not subject to the new arrangements. I recognise that it is sometimes necessary or sensible to modify a scheme once construction has started. I do not intend to penalise authorities in these instances and, provided such changes are agreed with the Welsh Office in advance, any cost implications will also be exempt from the reduced rate of support.

In reaching this decision, I have been mindful of the strong local authority opposition to earlier proposals to reduce the overall rate of Transport Grant support to 90 per cent. I accept their views that this would impose too great a burden on them and lead to the demise of many worthwhile schemes. I am sure that my proposals offer a reasonable compromise that will achieve my overall aim.

My decision to introduce package funding in Wales reflects the Government's policy to achieve a balanced and integrated transport system in Wales. We have too long relied on the private car and while this still has a

very important role to play, we need to invest in less environmentally damaging solutions. Extending Transport Grant support in this way provides a mechanism for local authorities to look at combinations of public transport and other alternative measures to alleviate transport problems in specific areas. As well as public transport, I will expect authorities to explore the possibilities of traffic management proposals and provision for cyclists and pedestrians. These arrangements will subsume the existing Bus Priority scheme.

The existing £5 million qualifying threshold for major road schemes will remain. I will also consider bids for major (over £5 million) public transport projects under Section 56 of the Transport Act 1968.

The working party also reported on a possible reduction in the duration of Transport Grant support. I accept their views that any move in this direction would discourage early scheme development work and encourage early settlement of contractors' and land compensation claims without necessarily obtaining the best value for money. I have not therefore made any changes to these arrangements.

HEALTH

Elderly People (Hospital Admissions)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in the United Kingdom aged over 60 years have been admitted to hospital for one or more nights in each of the last three years. [5479]

Mr. Boateng: The information available is for the number of hospital spells for people age 60 and over in England. Information relating to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is a matter for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Northern Ireland, respectively.

Number of hospital spells by duration of stay: age group—over 60 years

NHS hospitals, England

Duration of hospital spell	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
1 night	245,596	278,257	308,225
More than 1 night	2,128,588	2,171,518	2,162,919
Total	2,374,184	2,449,775	2,471,144

Note:
Data in this table are grossed for coverage.
Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics (HES).

Heart Transplants

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many heart transplants were carried out in United Kingdom NHS hospitals on United Kingdom residents in the latest year for which figures are available; how many hospitals are approved for carrying out heart transplant operations; and when and by what means the last new heart transplant centre was approved. [5839]

Mr. Boateng: 278 heart-only transplants (out of a total of 437 cardiothoracic transplants, including heart, lung and heart/lung operations) were carried out, on United Kingdom residents in United Kingdom National Health Service hospitals, during 1996.

Eight hospitals in England are designated, by the National Specialist Commissioning Advisory Group, to carry out cardiothoracic transplant operations:

Harefield Hospital NHS Trust, Middlesex (in conjunction with the Royal Brompton, London)
Papworth Hospital NHS Trust, Cambridge
Northern General Hospital NHS Trust, Sheffield
South Manchester University Hospitals NHS Trust
Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Trust, London
St. George's Healthcare Trust, London
Freeman Group of Hospitals, Newcastle-upon-Tyne
University Hospital Birmingham NHS Trust.

Under the arrangements which apply in Scotland, Glasgow Royal Infirmary is approved to undertake heart transplants.

The last new heart transplant unit to be designated was the University Hospital, Birmingham, NHS Trust, with effect from April 1992. A bid from the unit was considered by the Supra Regional Services Advisory Group. After due consideration, the Advisory Group recommended to the then Secretary of State that the Unit should be included in the designation arrangements for cardiothoracic transplantation. In reaching this decision, availability of organs, geographical spread of transplant units and availability of suitable clinical expertise would have been taken into account.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for the past five years as a whole, the regions in which the heart transplant patients operated on in each of the United Kingdom approved NHS heart transplant centres resided. [5838]

Mr. Boateng: The information available is provided in the attached table. The table, taken from information in the Supra Regional Services Advisory Group Annual Reports, shows the number of finished consultant episodes for assessment and transplantation and therefore add up to a number significantly greater than the number of transplants carried out in the period.

Region	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Northern and Yorkshire	48	141	717	223	279
Trent	33	133	163	114	150
Anglia and Oxford	29	306	387	141	133
North Thames	57	602	583	153	160
South Thames	45	502	567	118	196
South and West	38	396	407	137	145
West Midlands	29	369	525	185	212

Region	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
North West	52	164	162	177	174
Others[1]	70	410	499	302	244
Total	401	3,023	4,010	1,550	1,693

[1] This includes residents of Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and overseas residents eligible for care under reciprocal health agreements.

The following information shows the number of survivors of cardiothoracic transplantation, at Units in England, by Country and Region within the United Kingdom, as calculated in November 1996.

Country/Region	*Number of cardiothoracic transplant survivors as at November 1996*
Northern and Yorkshire	347
Trent	239
Anglia and Oxford	251
North Thames	308
South Thames	298
South and West	241
West Midlands	206
North West	277
Wales	122
Scotland	111
Northern Ireland	41
Total	2,441

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Salaried Solicitors

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he is considering for ending the present legal aid system and replacing it by a network of salaried solicitors. [5620]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor has appointed Sir Peter Middleton to undertake a review of civil justice and legal aid. A preliminary report is expected at the end of September. Any decisions on the future of legal aid will have to await the outcome of that review.

Access to the Law

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make it his policy to ensure that no citizen is deterred from having access to the law because of their financial circumstances. [5618]

Mr. Hoon: The Government's aim is to allow proper access to the law by reducing the price of civil litigation and its attendant delays and complexity. That is why the Lord Chancellor has asked Sir Peter Middleton to review civil justice and legal aid. We shall be able to look again at the policy on publicly funded access to the law in the light of that review.

Collateral Benefit and Fatal Accident Damages

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Law Commission plans to publish its consultation papers on *(a)* collateral benefit in personal injury claims and *(b)* fatal accident damages. [5118]

Mr. Hoon: The Law Commission hopes that publication of these two consultation papers will take place later this year.

Psychiatric Injury

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Law Commission report on psychiatric injury, responding to consultation paper 137, will be published. [5120]

Mr. Hoon: The Law Commission hopes that publication of the report on Liability for Psychiatric Illness, following consultation paper 137, will take place later this year.

Personal Injury Actions

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many personal injury actions were commenced in *(a)* the County Courts and *(b)* the High Court in (i) the last three months of 1996 and (ii) the first three months of 1997. [5115]

Mr. Hoon: The question concerns a matter which has been assigned to the Court Service under the terms of its framework document. I have therefore asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Michael Huebner to Mr. Andrew Dismore, dated 27 June 1997:

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, has asked me to reply to your Question about the number of personal injury cases commenced in the county courts and the High Court.

Detailed figures for personal injury actions issued are not kept centrally in the form requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. However, estimated figures, based on sample data, are shown below for the whole of 1996:

	Number
Writs and originating summonses (issued in the Royal Courts of Justice):	1,543
Summonses issued in the county courts.	253,500

No data is yet available for 1997.

Aggravated Damages

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Law Commission report on aggravated damages, responding to consultation paper 132, will be published. [5119]

Mr. Hoon: The Law Commission hopes that publication of the report on Aggravated, Exemplary and Restitutionary Damages, following consultation paper 132, will take place later this year.

PRIME MINISTER

Minister Without Portfolio

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister what access *(a)* the Minister without Portfolio and *(b)* his personal staff have to information obtained by the security services. [5414]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 June 1997]:* As with other Ministers, such access as is authorised under the relevant legislation and as is necessary for the performance of their duties.

OSCE (Parliamentary Delegation)

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Prime Minister if he will announce the membership of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE. [6145]

The Prime Minister: I have appointed 13 representatives from the Parliament of the United Kingdom to act as the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE. The next meeting of the Assembly will take place in Warsaw from 5 to 8 July. The delegation will consist of eight Members of the Labour Party, three Members of the Conservative Party and two Members of the Liberal Democrat Party. I have also appointed a number of substitute delegates.

The appointment of Conservative and Liberal Democrat Party representatives and substitutes have been made on the basis of nominations by the parties concerned.

Representatives from the Government Benches will be:

The hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), who will act as leader; the hon. Members for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), for Tooting (Mr. Cox), for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr. Davis), for Walsall, South (Mr. George), for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) and for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) and Baroness Ramsay of Cartvale.

Representatives from the Conservative Party will be:

The right hon. Members for East Devon (Sir Peter Emery) and for Wealden (Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith) and Viscount Montgomery of Alamein.

Representatives from the Liberal Democrat Party will be:

The hon. Members for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and for Richmond Park (Ms Tonge).

The following substitutes have been appointed to act as necessary on behalf of the delegates:

From the Government benches—the hon. Members for Cynon Valley (Ms Clwyd), for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) and for Newcastle under Lyme (Mrs. Golding).

From the Opposition benches—the right hon. the Lord Jopling and the hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell).

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Attorney-General what discussions have taken place in the past year in the North Atlantic Council on the International Court of Justice's advisory opinions of 8 July 1996 on the legality of nuclear weapons. [4912]

Mr. Fatchett: I have been asked to reply.

The advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the legality of nuclear weapons has been discussed in NATO, in particular by the Staff Group of the Nuclear Planning Group. NATO allies agree that the Alliance's strategy of war prevention, including its nuclear component, is fully compatible with the United Nations Charter and international law.

CABINET OFFICE

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio if he will list the meetings he held with *(a)* ministerial colleagues and *(b)* others on each day from 16 June to 20 June. [5619]

Mr. Mandelson: I have nothing to add to the replies I have already given the hon. Member.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Internet

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what use he plans to make of the Internet to make Government more open. [5103]

Mr. Doug Henderson: This Department will continue to develop its programme of Internet publishing to facilitate the wider dissemination of Foreign and Commonwealth Office news and information material, in line with the Open Government Code of Practice. This includes guidance on how to complain for those dissatisfied with Consular Services provided at British Embassies, High Commissions or consulates overseas.

It is planned to establish websites for the following forthcoming international meetings which the UK will host: the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, the EU Presidency, the Asia-Europe Meeting and the "Summit of the 8".

For an account of "FCO On-Line" (http://www.fco.gov.uk/), the world-wide web service of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the then Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the previous right hon. Member for Richmond and Barnes on 11 March 1997, *Official Report*, columns *151–52*.

Some British missions overseas also maintain Internet websites and for a list of these I refer the hon. Member to the answer the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs gave in another place on 3 June 1997, *Official Report, House of Lords*, columns *19–20*.

Special Operations Executive

Mr. Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to release more records of the wartime Special Operations Executive. [6218]

Mr. Robin Cook: The next batch of SOE records for release, covering the Balkans, will be the largest so far. They have been transferred to the Public Record Office, and will be opened on 1 July 1997. Further SOE records will be released in due course.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Airline Merger

Miss McIntosh: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action she will take to ensure that the proposed merger between British Airways and American Airlines will not prove to have anti-competitive consequences. [4632]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 26 June 1997]:* The UK competition authorities are currently considering the proposed alliance between British Airways and American Airlines, in consultation with the European Commission. It is not the practice of my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade to comment publicly on the timing or substance of competition cases in which she will be responsible for making a decision.

Military Equipment Sales (Indonesia)

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what military equipment is being sold to Indonesia by British defence companies; and which companies are making such sales. [1975]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 16 June 1997]:* Statistics are available in the House of Commons Library which list by destination and by category the number of export licences issued. The latest date for which these are currently available is 30 June 1996. The following table is extracted from these statistics and relates to export licences issued for military goods to Indonesia from 1995 to June 1996. They are listed by the Export of Goods (Control) Order category for the main goods on the export licence:

1995		*1st half 1996*	
ML1–3	ML11–18	ML2–2	ML13–2
ML2–2	ML13–3	ML5–1	ML14–2
ML3–3	ML14–8	ML6–3	ML15–4
ML4–1	ML15–9	ML7–2	ML24–2
ML5–7	ML24–1	ML10–18	PL5006–1
ML6–14	PL5006–7	ML11–6	PL5017–2
ML10–9	PL5027–4		

Export licences issued do not necessarily equate to actual sales; the Licensing Authority does not receive information on goods shipped. Any more detailed information on the licences themselves could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The Licensing Authority does not have information on non-licensable equipment which may be intended for use by military entities.

The Foreign Secretary announced in Parliament on 22 May *Official Report*, column *135*, that the Government will not permit the sale of arms to regimes that might use them for internal repression or international aggression. Whilst we support a strong UK defence industry, such support must go hand in hand with ensuring that exports are properly regulated.

Ministers have therefore initiated an urgent joint FCO/DTI review of the criteria used in considering licence applications for the export of conventional arms to all countries, including of course, Indonesia. The new criteria will be made available to the House of Commons when the review is complete.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade which British banks were granted export credit guarantee cover to finance British companies supplying military, security and police equipment or services to Indonesia since 1988; and if she will list (i) the amount of export credit guarantees provided in each case (ii) the services and equipment covered and (iii) for which countries the exports were destined. [3382]

Mrs. Roche: ECGD's current exposure on defence contracts with Indonesia (including police requirements) is in excess of £1 billion. A larger number of contracts are being supported involving a number of UK manufacturers and financing banks. As mentioned in ECGD's Annual Report and Trade Accounts, ECGD supported business included sale of Hawk Aircraft and the Scorpion Family of vehicles. Other supported business included Armoured Personnel Carriers, Forensic Laboratory Equipment and Aircraft Simulators.

ECGD is constrained by legal commitments not to give details of contract, without consulting the companies concerned. In view of the large number of banks and contracts involved, disproportionate costs would be involved in such a consultative exercise.

On 22 May, *Official Report*, column *135*, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs announced that the Government will not permit the sale of arms to regimes that might use them for internal repression or international aggression. Whilst we support a strong UK defence industry, such support must go hand in hand with ensuring that exports are properly regulated.

Ministers have therefore initiated an urgent joint FCO/DTI review of the criteria used in considering licence applications for the export of conventional arms to all countries, including of course, Indonesia. The new criteria will be made available to the House when the review is complete.

IDEX 97

Ann Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many British companies have been given public funds to attend IDEX 97; and if she will list the companies indicating the amount of the funding each received. [3699]

Mrs. Roche: The latest IDEX Exhibition took place in Abu Dhabi, 16–20 March 1997. The DTI provided support for UK firms to exhibit in the form of grants towards the cost of participation. Support totalling £380,000 was provided via the Defence Manufacturers

Association to 48 companies exhibiting at this event. A further 15 companies were part of the UK group but either did not apply for or were ineligible for grant. A list of UK companies participating is being placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

TREASURY

Jobs

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to Treasury press release 60/97 of 4 June 1997, what is his definition of a real and lasting job. [3357]

Mrs. Liddell: The Chancellor of the Exchequer's "Getting Europe to Work" initiative (announced in Treasury Press release 60/97) is about promoting job creation and social cohesion in Europe. It focuses on the need for a skilled, trained and adaptable labour force and a flexible labour market, underpinned by minimum standards of fairness and decency including a national minimum wage. The Government is committed to introduce programmes to help young people and the long-term unemployed move from welfare and into work.

These policies are aimed at creating and underpinning real and lasting jobs. They therefore mark a break from past cycles of unemployment followed by places on dead-end schemes and brief periods of unskilled temporary work which did nothing to enhance people's long term employment prospects or reduce their dependence on welfare.

Departmental Advisers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the special advisers in his Department, the Minister to whom each is responsible, the subjects on which they advise and the number of advisers in his Department in the year up to 1 May. [5348]

Mrs. Liddell: Four paid Special Advisers have been appointed in the following capacities:

Ed Balls: Chancellor's Economic Adviser

Charlie Whelan: Chancellor's Press Adviser

Ed Miliband: Special Adviser to the Chief Secretary

Andrew Maugham: Special Adviser to the Chief Secretary.

They are employed under terms and conditions based on the model contract for Special Advisers, a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House. They advise, in accordance with Schedule 1 (part 1) of the model contract, on the full range of subjects dealt with by the Treasury. Their principal areas of responsibility are as follows:

Ed Balls: Public expenditure; growth; windfall levy; EU and European Monetary Union; international economic issues; welfare to work; debt management issues; low pay.

Ed Miliband: Welfare to work; public expenditure; low pay; taxation; industry; devolution; financial services; briefing on the economy; women's issues.

Andrew Maugham: Public expenditure (including comprehensive spending reviews); financial services; value for money in the public services; public sector pay; export credit; public/private partnerships; accounting issues.

Charlie Whelan: Presentation of Treasury policies in all areas.

In the year to 1 May 1997, three Special Advisers were employed in the Treasury. Their dates of employment during that period were: 1 May 1996 to 1 May 1997; 9 May 1996 to 24 April 1997 and 13 May 1996 to 1 May 1997.

Euro Coins

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost to the United Kingdom of minting coins for the euro if the United Kingdom adopts the single currency according to the specifications currently before the European Council. [5394]

Mrs. Liddell: The Chancellor has not made any estimate of the cost of producing euro coins if the United Kingdom were to adopt the single currency. The costs would depend on detailed specifications of the coins beyond the scope of the proposal from the European Commission.

Unemployment

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what targets he has for the reduction of unemployment *(a)* in the United Kingdom, *(b)* in England and *(c)* in London. [4116]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 26 June 1997]:* Our policies aim to secure the goal of high and stable levels of employment. With this in mind, we will be announcing in the Budget details of our proposals to help young and long-term unemployed people move from welfare to work. We have not, however, set targets for the reduction of unemployment at either the national or local levels.

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many persons aged under 25 years are registered unemployed in the constituency of Middlesbrough, South and East Cleveland. [5560]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Dr. Ashok Kumar, dated 27 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on how many persons under 25 years are registered unemployed in the Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland parliamentary constituency

The data you have requested can only be derived from the monthly count of people claiming unemployment-related benefits (i.e. Unemployment Benefit and Income Support which were replaced by Jobseeker's Allowance in October 1996, or National Insurance credits). Essentially, all people who attend an Employment Service office to sign on the designated day are counted.

In April 1997, the latest date for which figures are available, there were 937 claimants aged 18 to 24 years in the constituency of Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland parliamentary constituency.

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made as to whether the unemployment figures published by his Department accurately reflect the number of people unemployed. [5490]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Sir Richard Body, dated 27 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on whether the unemployment figures accurately reflect the number of people unemployed.

I am responsible for deciding the form, coverage and timing of release of statistics issued by ONS, taking into account the views of customers. ONS consulted customers on the future presentation of labour market statistics; the consultation exercise was launched through an article in the *Labour Market Trends* published on 8 May. These proposals included the possibility of producing a monthly report from the LFS. Comments on the proposals should have been sent to ONS by 14 June.

The proposals set out for consultation reflect the House of Commons Employment Select Committee recommendation that more prominence should be given to the measure of unemployment which is based on the internationally agreed ILO definition.

ONS will publicly make available a response commanding wide support. The Government is committed to ensuring the widest possible acceptable of these statistics.

Home Births

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of babies were born at home in *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Wales in (i) 1994, (ii) 1995 and (iii) 1996. [5275]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Ronnie Fearn, dated 27 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply, as Director of the Office for National Statistics, to your recent parliamentary question on the proportion of live births at home.

The percentages of live births occurring at home for the countries and years requested are shown below

	1994	*1995*	*1996*
England	1.8	1.9	2.1
Scotland[1]	0.7	0.9	0.8
Wales	1.9	2.1	2.1

[1] All livebirths outside hospital.

Low Pay

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people earn less than £3.50 per hour in the constituency of Middlesbrough, South and East Cleveland. [5561]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Dr. Ashok Kumar, dated 27 June 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on earnings in the Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland parliamentary constituency.

The latest information, from the New Earnings Survey (NES) April 1996, precedes the creation of Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland parliamentary constituency. Data for the parliamentary constituencies before they were redefined prior to the last General Election are given below:

Employees on adult rates whose pay for the survey pay-period was not affected by absence NES, April 1996

Percentage of employees with hourly earnings (excluding overtime) less than £3.50

	Langbaurgh	*Middlesbrough*	*Redcar*
Full-time	10.9	7.5	4.7
Part-time	27.8	33.0	38.5
All	14.6	15.6	10.3

The Finance Bill

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to publish the Finance Bill; and when he will make notes on the Bill's clauses available to hon. Members. [3506]

Mr. Gordon Brown *[pursuant to his reply, 11 June 1997, c. 448]:* The Finance Bill will be published by The Stationery Office on Tuesday 8 July. Explanatory Notes on the Bill's clauses will be placed in the Vote Office and the Libraries of the House that day. Copies of the Bill will be available to Members from the Vote Office at the conclusion of the Budget debate on Monday 7 July.

DEFENCE

Married Quarters

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much was paid in fees to National Westminster Markets Ltd. for preparing and completing the asset sale of the Ministry of Defence married quarters to Nomura Investment Bank. [4042]

Mr. Spellar: I am currently considering our policy of withholding the information requested under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information and hope to reach a decision shortly.

Nuclear Weapons (Costs)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the proportion of the defence budget for (i) each of the last 10 years and (ii) the current year spent on *(a)* capital spending and *(b)* running costs for nuclear weapons. [4755]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 23 June 1997]:* Polaris and Trident capital and running costs for years 1987–88 to 1996–97 as a percentage of the defence budget are as follows:

	Capital costs	*Running costs*
1987–88	3	2
1988–89	4	1

	Capital costs	Running costs
1989–90	4	1
1990–91	4	1
1991–92	5	1
1992–93	4	1
1993–94	4	1
1994–95	3	1
1995–96	2	1
1996–97	2	1

The estimate for 1997–98 for capital costs represents 1 per cent. of the 1997–98 defence budget. No consolidated estimate of Polaris and Trident running costs for 1997–98 is yet available. The costs of the WE177 free-fall nuclear bomb which will go out of service by 31 March 1998 and the Lance nuclear artillery system which was withdrawn from service in 1992–93 are not recorded separately. However, records show that there has been no major capital expenditure on WE177 in the last four years.

SCOTLAND

Internet

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what use he plans to make of the Internet to make Government more open. [5101]

Mr. Dewar: The Scottish Office already makes use of the Internet to publish electronically information about its work. An updated Web site is being developed to replace the current version, which has been available since August 1995. The updated site will provide further information about the business of the Department, including named contacts; full text of Departmental publications, including press releases, consultation papers and statistical bulletins; national and Departmental Charter standards and information about performance against these; information about Departmental complaints procedures; and regulatory forms and guidance.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution will launch a separate Scottish Devolution Web site in Edinburgh on 30 June. This will provide details of the Government's proposals for a Scottish Parliament including access to Ministerial speeches, details of meetings and Parliamentary proceedings.

In addition, the Scottish Office is examining the delivery of further services electronically where that will deliver better quality or efficiency.

Health Service (Administration)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will list for each national health service trust operating in Scotland the names of the *(a)* chief executive, *(b)* chairman, *(c)* executive directors and *(d)* non-executive directors indicating the correspondence address for the trust; [5126]

(2) if he will list for each health board in Scotland the names of the board *(a)* general manager, *(b)* chairman, *(c)* executive directors and *(d)* non-executive directors indicating the correspondence address for the health board. [5128]

Mr. Galbraith: The information sought is lengthy and I will write to the honourable Member. These details will take account of appointments I have announced which will be effective from 1 July. A copy of this information will be placed in the Library.

Departmental Advisers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the special advisers in his Department, the Minister to whom each is responsible, the subjects on which they advise and the number of advisers in his Department in the year up to 1 May. [5366]

Mr. Dewar: My Department employs two Special Advisers, Ms Wendy Alexander and Mr. Murray Elder. Both are responsible to me. They are employed under the terms and conditions based on the model contract for Special Advisers, a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House. Both advise on the wide range of issues dealt with by my Department in accordance with Schedule 1 (Part 1) of the Model Contract. Mr. Elder advises specifically on education and industry matters and with issues relating to agriculture, the environment and fisheries. Ms Alexander advises on health and the Arts, local government, housing and transport. In addition, both deal with matters relating to Home Affairs and Devolution.

Two Special Advisers were employed by my Department in the year up to 1 May 1997.

Fox and Mink Factory Farms

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many fox and mink factory farms there are in Scotland by county. [5557]

Mr. Chisholm: There are no fox or mink farms in operation in Scotland.

Scottish Grand Committee

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will announce his proposals for the dates, times, venues and membership for meetings of the Scottish Grand Committee during the current parliamentary session; if he will list the proposed dates, times, venues and membership; and if he will make a statement on the role of the Scottish Grand Committee. [2586]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 10 June 1997]:* The Scottish Grand Committee is a forum for all Scottish Constituency MPs to consider and debate issues of relevance to Scotland. I intend that this continue. It is proposed that eight meetings will take place in 1997–98 on the basis of four subjects to be chosen by the Government for debate and two each to be debated on Liberal Democrat and the Scottish National Party subjects.

I will announce the provisional timetable for Scottish Grand Committee meetings to the House in due course.

Natural Heritage Designations Review

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the outcome of the natural heritage designations review discussion paper. [3823]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 23 June 1997]:* We have received almost 80 responses to the discussion paper published last year following the Review of Natural Heritage Designations. Many of these responses are of considerable length and include detailed comments on the issues raised in the discussion paper. We are currently giving careful consideration to all the points made by respondents before taking decisions on the need for changes to the present system of land-based natural heritage designations in use in Scotland.

Drugs

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list by type of drug the number of persons for each police authority *(a)* cautioned, *(b)* proceeded against in a magistrates court and *(c)* tried at the Crown court for possession of a proscribed drug in (i) 1994, (ii) 1995 and (iii) the last 12 month period for which figures are available. [4791]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 19 June 1997]:* Formal police cautions are not used in Scotland. Details of the number of persons proceeded against in all courts and the number proceeded against in solemn courts for possession of a controlled drug in 1994 and 1995 by type of drug and police force area are given in the tables below. Information is not available on the number of trials for persons proceeded against in solemn courts. Data for 1996 will not be available until the late autumn.

Number of persons proceeded against for possession of drugs by type of drugs offence and police force

Police force	*All drugs*[1]	*Cocaine*	*Heroin*	*LSD*	*MDMA*	*Methadone*	*Amphetamines*	*Cannabis*	*Other*
Number of persons proceeded against in all courts (1994)									
Central	316	0	2	13	3	0	35	284	7
Dumfries and Galloway	183	0	3	10	1	0	29	146	14
Fife	176	0	0	1	0	0	18	167	3
Grampian	679	1	19	25	21	2	103	583	17
Lothian and Borders	809	4	2	43	31	4	153	648	60
Northern	199	0	2	2	2	0	24	182	2
Strathclyde	2,076	13	91	69	37	7	262	1,703	96
Tayside	366	0	0	13	12	2	53	325	24
Scotland	4,804	18	119	176	107	15	677	4,038	223
Persons proceeded against in solemn courts (1994)									
Central	23	0	1	4	1	0	5	20	0
Dumfries and Galloway	5	0	0	2	0	0	1	4	2
Fife	7	0	0	0	0	0	4	7	0
Grampian	26	0	4	6	4	0	5	17	2
Lothian and Borders	40	4	0	11	5	1	15	22	11
Northern	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Strathclyde	133	4	19	12	7	2	27	79	10
Tayside	17	0	0	3	3	0	8	14	2
Scotland	253	8	24	38	20	3	65	165	27
Persons proceeded against in all courts (1995)									
Central	163	1	2	6	2	0	15	146	4
Dumfries and Galloway	156	0	4	2	1	0	22	139	6
Fife	262	0	4	4	10	0	36	237	2
Grampian	808	8	34	20	34	2	136	674	45
Lothian and Borders	149	0	0	3	5	0	6	140	3
Northern	126	0	0	2	1	0	12	113	2
Strathclyde	2,389	11	155	47	87	11	326	1,913	87
Tayside	264	8	5	2	11	2	42	226	12
Scotland	4,317	20	204	86	151	15	595	3,588	161
Persons proceeded against in solemn courts (1995)									
Central	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0
Dumfries and Galloway	7	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	1
Fife	6	0	1	0	0	0	1	5	0
Grampian	17	1	2	1	3	0	7	12	2
Lothian and Borders	6	0	0	0	4	0	0	4	0
Northern	3	0	0	1	0	0	3	1	0
Strathclyde	118	3	23	12	11	3	25	66	15
Tayside	15	0	4	1	3	2	3	12	3
Scotland	176	4	30	15	21	5	40	111	21

Note:
[1]Columns cannot be added together since a person may be dealt with for more than one type of drug.
Source:
Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Green Belt Policy

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement regarding his Department's policy towards building on land designated as Green Belt. [5606]

Mr. Raynsford: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) on 22 May 1997, *Official Report*, column *152*.

Biotech Companies (Liquid Waste)

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the Advisory Committee for Genetic Modification about its consideration of allowing direct discharge of untreated liquid wastes from biotech companies into the environment. [5647]

Angela Eagle: The Health and Safety Commission's Advisory Committee on Genetic Modification (ACGM) is currently considering, in consultation with interested bodies, the matter of direct discharge of those untreated liquid wastes which are judged, on the basis of thorough risk assessment, not to pose a risk of harm to the environment. This matter is covered by the Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 1992, as amended in 1996. The Health and Safety Executive enforces these Regulations and will consider ACGM's advice before agreeing with the relevant Departments (so far as matters relate to the environment) the best way to proceed.

Water Companies (Investment)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the proportion of water service companies' total capital investment in *(a)* water leakage reduction, *(b)* renewal of mains water supply pipes, *(c)* sewage treatment and *(d)* replacement of public sewers in each of the past three years. [5154]

Angela Eagle: Information on total capital expenditure in sewage treatment and maintenance of mains water supply pipes and public sewers, generally referred to as maintenance of underground assets, is published in summary in OFWAT's annual reports on the "Financial Performance and Capital Investment of the Water Companies in England and Wales". Copies of these reports are available in the Library.

Specific figures for expenditure on leakage reduction are not available, as spending on leakage is allocated across a number of expenditure headings in the water companies' July Returns to OFWAT. These returns give details of the companies' regulated activities, service to customers and expenditure on both capital investment and operating costs in the previous year. Copies of these returns are available in the Library.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what investment was made by Severn Trent plc in (i) 1994, (ii) 1995 and (iii) 1996 in *(a)* replacement and renewal of main water supply pipes and *(b)* replacement and renewal of public sewers. [5153]

Angela Eagle: Information on individual water companies' investment in the maintenance of water supply pipes and public sewers, generally referred to as maintenance of underground assets, is published in OFWAT's annual reports on the "Financial Performance and Capital Investment of the Water Companies in England and Wales". Copies of these reports are available in the Library.

Council Tax

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to make changes to council tax band differentials. [5282]

Mr. Raynsford: The question of whether any changes should be made to the ratios between council tax bands is one that the Government will wish to discuss with the Local Government Association and others before reaching a view.

Water Charges

Mr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to reduce the variation in charges levied for water supply by different water supply companies, with special reference to variations within the same geographical areas. [5267]

Angela Eagle: Water charges levied by individual water companies are a matter for the Director General of Water Services, who is responsible for setting price limits for water and sewerage services.

The Director General is currently conducting a periodic review of price limits which will set the framework for charges from 1 April 2000.

Light Pollution

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his policy in respect of light pollution in rural areas. [5302]

Angela Eagle: The Government believes that the intrusiveness of lighting in rural areas should be kept to a minimum and that problems that may arise from artificial lighting are most appropriately dealt with by raising public awareness and by providing guidance on how these prolems might be mitigated.

These issues and the wider ranging concerns of light pollution are now being considered by my officials.

Radioactive Contamination

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he received from his French counterpart in respect of the level of radioactive contamination recently discovered in the English Channel off Cap de la Hague; and what plans he has to communicate with the Channel Islands states authorities over the environmental threat posed by the radioactive discharges. [5338]

Angela Eagle: No recent representation has been received from the French authorities in respect of radioactivity in the English Channel.

Monitoring carried out by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the English Channel shows that the contamination of marine foodstuffs and environmental indicator materials attributable to discharges of radioactivity from the Cap de la Hague reprocessing plant is of negligible radiological significance.

Officials of United Kingdom Departments meet representatives of the Channel Islands states on a regular basis to discuss matters of common interest.

Water Meters

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps are being taken to monitor the impact of the introduction of pre-payment water meters. [5380]

Angela Eagle: The Director General of Water Services informs me that OFWAT is actively monitoring the use of pre-payment water units.

The legality of the installation of these units is to be the subject of a forthcoming judicial review and their use will be considered as part of the Government's review of the system of water charges, which we announced at the Water Summit on 19 May. I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment and Countryside on 25 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *514*, on the commencement of the review.

Train Operating Companies

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much was paid by OPRAF in 1996–97 to each of the train operating companies under its performance regime; and how much those train operating companies paid to Railtrack under the access contract performance regime indicating separately *(a)* supplementary access charges and *(b)* performance payments. [4581]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The payments to and from train operating companies under the performance regime in franchise agreements are a matter for the Franchising Director. I understand that he will publish these details in his Annual Report in the coming weeks. Payments under the incentive schemes which operate between Railtrack and the train operating companies are commercially confidential to the companies concerned.

Aircraft Departure Slots

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on BAA's policy in respect of aircraft queuing for take-off in order to maximise the number of departure slots. [5400]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The determination of departure slots at the UK's major airports is a matter for Airport Co-ordination Ltd. (ACL), in conjunction with BAA and National Air Traffic Services Ltd. ACL is wholly owned by 10 UK airlines. There is no policy on aircraft queuing to maximise the number of departure slots.

Coastguard

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many coastguard watch assistants originally recruited for *(a)* operational and *(b)* administrative duties are currently employed within HM Coastguard; [5597]

(2) how many Coastguard watch assistants are earning less than *(a)* £6,000 and *(b)* £7,000 per annum; [5598]

(3) how many staff were employed in Coastguard Agency HQ for each of the last three years; [5599]

(4) if he will list for each of the last five years Coastguard staff serving in the grades (i) regional controller, (ii) deputy regional controller, (iii) district controller/officer, (iv) station officer and (v) coastguard officer excluding those employed at Coastguard HQ. [5600]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Coastguard Agency to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from C. J. Harris to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 27 June 1997:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your recent Questions about staff levels and earnings in the Coastguard Agency.

PQ 5597

Of the initial Coastguard Watch Assistants recruited (174 operations and 34 administration), 150 operations and 30 administration remain in post.

PQ 5598

(a) No Coastguard Watch Assistants earn under £6,000 per annum (pro rata).

(b) Currently 113 Coastguard Watch Assistants (79 full and 34 part time) earn less than £7,000 (pro rata). They all currently earn £6,928.00 per annum with a pay award pending which will be backdated to April 1997.

PQ 5599

	1997	*1996*	*1995*
Coastguard HQ	82	81.5	80.5

All figures given are for 1 April.

PQ 5600

	1997	*1996*	*1995*	*1994*	*1993*
(i) Regional Controllers	5	5	6	6	6
(ii) Deputy Regional Controllers	6	6	7	6	6
(iii) District Controllers	21	21	20	19	21
(iv) Station Officers	42	44	43	42	45
(v) Coastguard Officers	318	359	362	383	383

All figures given are for 1 April.

Manchester Airport

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has received an application for a grant for rail freight to the construction site of runway two at Manchester Airport; and if he will make a statement. [5455]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We announced the award of almost £2.2 million in freight facilities grant on 23 June. The grant will lead to construction of a new temporary connection to the Manchester Airport Branch railway line so that the 1.4 million tonnes of limestone needed for the second runway can be carried by rail rather than by road, thereby avoiding 70,000 lorry journeys between the Peak District and Manchester.

The grant underlines the Government's commitment to getting freight off the road and onto the railway. It is good news for the rail industry and good news for the environment.

Cycling

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will encourage rail operators to sign the voluntary code of practice relating to the promotion of cycling. [5806]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I was delighted to have the opportunity to encourage operators to adopt the voluntary code of practice, *Providing for Cyclists,* when I spoke at the ceremony to announce it. The code is fully consistent with the Government's desire to see proper facilities for cyclists who wish to use the railway. We are currently reviewing the Franchising Director's Objectives, Instructions and Guidance and, as part of our review, we will be considering whether the Franchising Director should take further action to encourage increased provision for the carriage of cycles on trains.

Train Services (South-West)

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to review levels of train services to Penzance; [5485]

(2) what assessment he has made of the impact on local businesses of the recent reductions in the train service between Plymouth and Penzance; [5487]

(3) what plans he has to ensure that the level of rail service in the south west is sufficient to promote economic development in the region. [5486]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Franchising Director specifies minimum levels of service through the Passenger Service Requirement (PSR) which is incorporated in franchise agreements with train operating companies. Services operated over and above those required in the passenger service requirement are a commercial matter for the franchisee. There are no plans to review the PSRs relating to train services to Penzance.

There has been no reduction either in the PSRs or in Summer 1997 timetables for services between Plymouth and Penzance. On the contrary, South Wales and West has introduced a new daily service between Manchester and Penzance with effect from the summer timetable, and Great Western has introduced a number of new services on Sundays between Paddington and Penzance. There have been some operational problems in recent months which have affected service performance. The Government has made no assessment of the impact of local business of the recent operational problems in the south-west.

The Franchising Director closely monitors service performance and operators are penalised for cancellations and delays. Passengers are entitled to compensation for services which are below specified standards under the terms of franchise operators' Passenger's Charters. The Government wants to see greater use of the railway, higher levels of investment in the rail network, proper enforcement of train operators' services commitments and all the benefits of having a national railway network.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Jet Ski Safety

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has for new measures to improve jet ski safety. [5459]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have been asked to reply.

Local authorities already have powers to make byelaws to regulate seaside pleasure boats for the prevention of danger, obstruction or annoyance to persons bathing in the sea or using the seashore.

In addition, the Coastguard Agency promotes the safe use of recreation craft through national campaigns, like the primary schools sea safety campaign and local accident prevention projects. The Sea Safety Liaison Group set up by the RNLI, with the Coastguard Agency and other bodies, also promotes this work. The Agency has also launched a consultative document, "Non-legislative measures for the improved safety of non-regulated pleasure vessels", to promote debate and draw together views from a wide range of authorities, organisations and bodies about the ways in which incidents can be reduced. So far the Coastguard Agency has received over 20 responses which are currently being analysed.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 296**

SESSION 1997–98

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SCOPE OF THE INDEX, ARRANGEMENT AND ABBREVIATIONS

This index is derived from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Information System (POLIS), and the subject terms used are based on those used in POLIS. There are often changes in column numbering, etc., between the daily part or weekly Hansard (which simply collects together the daily parts without revision) and the bound volume. The index for the bound volume is revised to take account of these changes and cannot therefore, be used in connection with the daily part or weekly Hansard. For these versions use the Fortnightly Index.

Scope and arrangement of the Index

Oral and Written Parliamentary Questions are indexed under subject headings and the names of Members asking and Ministers replying to them. Questions are not listed under the names of Departments replying. Departmental listings can be arrived at indirectly by looking under the names of the Minister(s) of that Department. There are, however, the headings 'Northern Ireland', 'Scotland', and 'Wales' under which one can find not only most Questions answered by the Northern Ireland Office, Scottish Office, Welsh Office but also Questions about these areas of the United Kingdom which are answered by other Departments. Ministerial statements are indexed under subject headings, under 'Ministerial statements' and the names of Ministers making them and Members speaking on them. General debates are indexed under broad subject headings and under the names of all Members and Ministers taking part. Debates on legislation (Bills, Orders, Regulations etc.) are indexed under the name of the Bill, Statutory Instruments [illegible] under subject headings and under the names of those taking part.

Rulings and Statements by Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker's rulings and statements'.

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The date of each item except Parliamentary Questions is inserted immediately before the reference.

Members' names are given in the form by which they prefer to be known and are printed in bold italics. Under their names, entries are arranged under one of the two headings *Debates, etc.* (to include interventions on statements, points of order and so on) or *Questions.*

Abbreviations

Bills 1R = first reading, 2R = second reading, Money res = money resolution, Comm = Committee stage, Rep = Report stage, 3R = third reading, amendt/amendts = amendment/amendments, * = matter taken formally, without debate.

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